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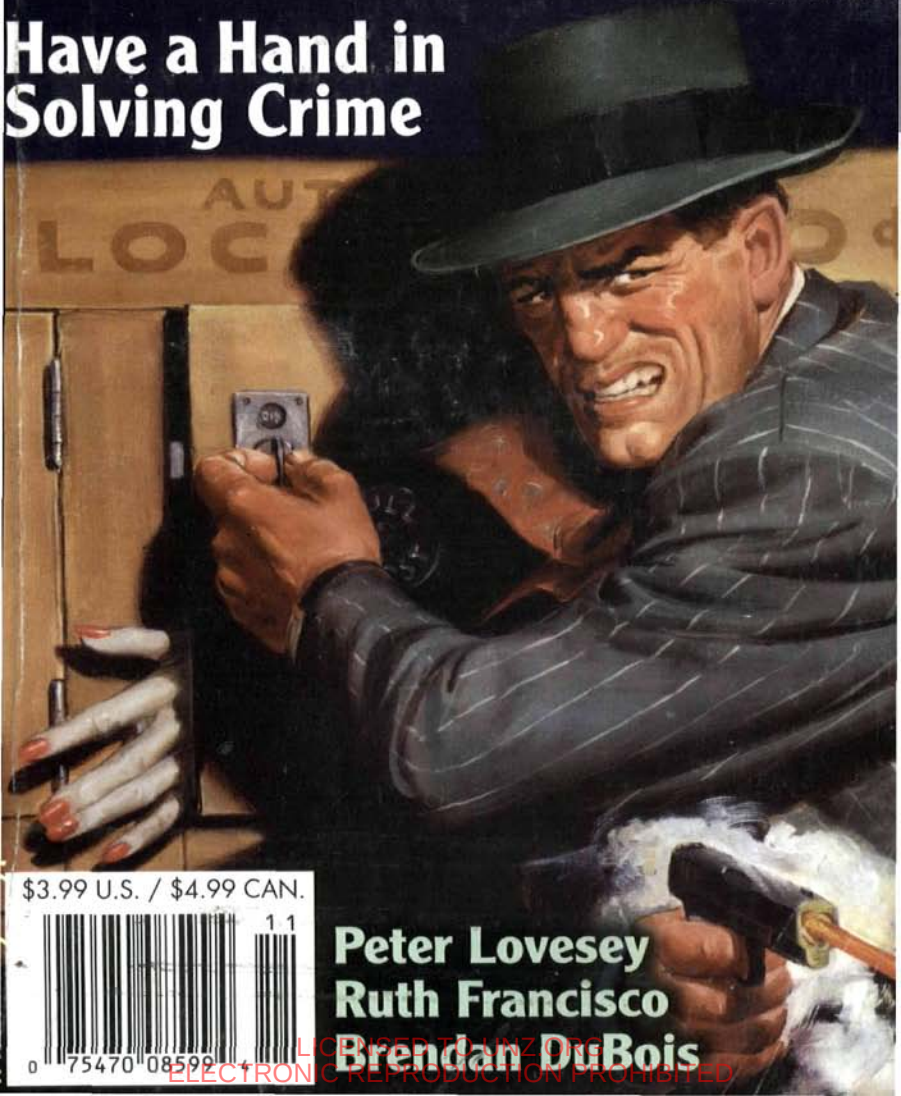

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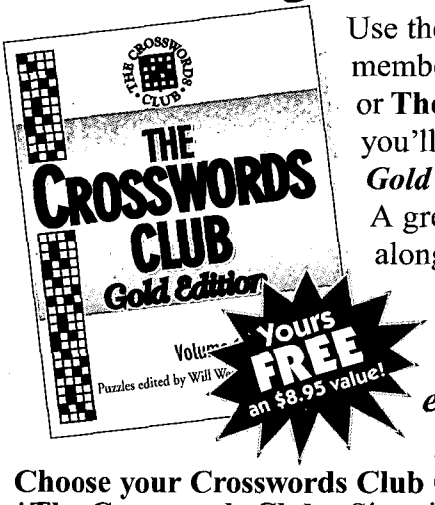

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Art by Allen Davis

POPPING ROUND TO THE POST

by Peter Lovesey

Nathan was the one I liked interviewing best. You wanted to believe him, his stories were so engaging. He had this persuasive, upbeat manner, sitting forward and fixing me with his soft blue eyes. Nothing about him suggested violence. "I don't know why you keep asking me about a murder. I don't know anything about a murder. I was just popping round to the post. It's no distance. Ten minutes, maybe. Up Steven Street and then right into Melrose Avenue."

"Popping round to the post?"

"Listen up, doc. I just told you."

"Did you have any letters with you at the time?"

"Can't remember."

"The reason I ask," I said, "is that when people go to the post they generally want to post something."

He smiled. "Good one. Like it." These memory lapses are a fea-

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ture of the condition. Nathan didn't appreciate that if a letter had been posted and delivered it would help corroborate his version of events.

Then he went into what I think of as his storyteller mode, one hand cupping his chin while the other unfolded between us as if he were a conjurer producing a coin. "Do you want to hear what happened?"

I nodded.

"There was I," he said, "walking up the street."

"Steven Street?"

"Yes."

"On the right side or the left?"

"What difference does that make?"

According to Morgan, the detective inspector, number twenty-nine, the murder house, was on the left about a third of the way along. "I'm asking, that's all."

"Well, I wouldn't need to cross, would I?" Nathan said. "So I was on the left, and when I got to Melrose—"

"Hold on," I said. "We haven't left Steven Street yet."

"I have," he said. "I'm telling you what happened in Melrose."

"Did you notice anything in Steven Street?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Somebody told me about an incident there."

"You're on about that again, are you? I keep telling you I know nothing about a murder."

"Go on, then."

"You'll never guess what I saw when I got to Melrose."

That was guaranteed. His trips to the post were always impossible to predict. "Tell me, Nathan."

"Three elephants."

"In *Melrose*?" Melrose Avenue is a small suburban back street. "What were they doing?"

He grinned. "Swinging their trunks. Flapping their ears."

"I mean, what were they doing in Melrose Avenue?"

He had me on a string now and he was enjoying himself. "What do you think?"

"I'm stumped. Why don't you tell me?"

"They were walking in a line."

"What, on their own?"

He gave me a look that suggested I was the one in need of psy-

Peter Lovesey debuted as a fiction writer in1970 with the creation of his famous Victorian series character Sergeant Cribb, and he became a full-time writer in 1975. Over the past thirty-plus years he's produced about as many books. 1991 saw the publication of the first book in his contemporary Peter Diamond series, about an ex-policeman in Bath. Mr. Lovesey is a recipient of the Diamond Dagger Award. His latest novel is *Secret Hangman* (Soho). †

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chotherapy. "They had a keeper with them, obviously."

"Trained elephants?"

Now he sighed at my ignorance. "Melrose Avenue isn't the African bush. Some little travelling circus was performing in the park and they were part of the procession."

"But if it was a circus procession, Nathan, it would go up the High Street where all the shoppers could see it."

"You're right about that."

"Then what were the elephants doing in Melrose?"

"Subsidence."

I waited for more.

"You know where they laid the cable for the television in the High Street? They didn't fill it in properly. A crack appeared right across the middle. They didn't want the elephants making it worse, so they diverted them around Melrose. The rest of the procession wasn't so heavy—the marching band and the clowns and the bareback rider. They were allowed up the High Street."

The story had a disarming logic, like so many of Nathan's. On a previous trip to the post he'd spotted Johnny Depp trimming a privet hedge in somebody's front garden. Johnny Depp as a jobbing gardener. Nathan had asked some questions and some joker had told him they were rehearsing a scene for a film about English suburban life. He'd suggested I go round there myself and try to get in the film as an extra. I had to tell him I'm content with my career.

"It was a diversion, you see. Road closed to heavy vehicles and elephants."

Talk about diversions. We'd already diverted some way from the double murder in Steven Street. "What I'd really like to know from you, Nathan, is why you came home that afternoon wearing a suit that didn't fit you."

This prompted a chuckle. "That's a longer story."

"I thought it might be. I need to hear it, please."

He spread his hands as if he was addressing a larger audience. "There were these three elephants."

"You told me about them already."

"Ah, but I was anticipating. When I first spotted the elephants I didn't know what they were doing in Melrose. I thought about asking the keeper. I'm not afraid of speaking to strangers. On the whole, people like it when you approach them. But the keeper was in charge of the animals, so I didn't distract him. I could hear the sound of the band coming from the High Street and I guessed there was a connection. I stepped out to the end of Melrose."

"Where the postbox is."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"When you started out, you were popping round to the post."

"Now you've interrupted my train of thought. You know what my memory is like."

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"You were going towards the sound of the band."

He smiled. "And I looked up, and I saw balloons in the sky. Lots of colours, all floating upwards. They fill them with some sort of gas."

"Helium."

"Thank you. They must have been advertising the circus. Once I got to the end of Melrose Avenue I saw a woman with two children and each of them had a balloon and there was writing on them—the balloons, I mean, not the children. I couldn't see the wording exactly, but I guessed it must have been about the circus."

"Very likely." In my job, patience isn't just a virtue, it's a necessity.

"You may think so," Nathan said, and he held up his forefinger to emphasise the point. "But this is the strange thing. I was almost at the end of Melrose and I looked up again to see if the balloons in the sky were still in sight and quite by chance I noticed that a yellow one was caught in the branches of a willow tree. Perhaps you know that tree. It isn't in the street. It's actually in someone's garden overhanging the street. Well, I decided to try and set this balloon free. It was just out of reach, but by climbing on the wall I could get to it easily. That's what I did. And when I got my hands on the balloon and got it down I saw that the writing on the side had nothing to do with the circus. It said *Happy Birthday, Susie.*"

Inwardly, I was squirming. I know how these stories progress. Nathan once found a brooch on his way to the post and took it to the police station and was invited to put on a Mickey Mouse mask and join an identity parade and say "Empty the drawer and hand it across or I'll blow your brains out." And that led on to a whole different adventure. "Did you do anything about it?"

"About what?"

"The happy-birthday balloon."

"I had to, now I had it in my hands. I thought perhaps it belonged to the people in the house, so I knocked on the door. They said it wasn't theirs, but they'd noticed some yellow balloons a couple of days ago tied to the gatepost of a house in Steven Street."

"Steven Street?" My interest quickened. "What number?"

"Can't remember. These people—the people in Melrose with the willow tree—were a bit surprised because they thought the house belonged to an elderly couple. Old people don't have balloons on their birthdays, do they?"

"So you tried the house in Steven Street," I said, giving the narrative a strong shove.

"I did, and they were at home and really appreciated my thoughtfulness. All their other balloons had got loose and were blown away, so this was the only one left. I asked if the old lady was called Susie, thinking I'd wish her a happy birthday. She was not. She was called something totally unlike Susie. I think it was Agatha, or Augusta. Or it may have been Antonia."

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"Doesn't matter, Nathan. Go on."

"They invited me in to meet Susie. They said she'd just had her seventh birthday and—would you believe it?—she was a dog. One of the smallest I've ever seen, with large ears and big, bulgy eyes."

"Chihuahua."

"No, Susie. Definitely Susie. The surprising thing was that this tiny pooch had a room to herself, with scatter cushions and squeaky toys and a little television that was playing *Lassie Come Home*. But the minute she set eyes on me she started barking. Then she ran out, straight past me, fast as anything. The back door of the house was open and she got out. The old man panicked a bit and said Susie wasn't allowed in the garden without her lead. She was so small that they were afraid of losing her through a gap in the fence. I felt responsible for frightening her, so I ran into the garden after her, trying to keep her in sight. I watched her dash away across the lawn. Unfortunately, I didn't notice there was a goldfish pond in my way. I stepped into it, slipped, and landed facedown in the water."

"Things certainly happen to you, Nathan."

He took this as a compliment and grinned. "The good thing was that Susie came running back to see what had happened and the old lady picked her up. I was soaking and covered in slime and duckweed, so they told me I couldn't possibly walk through the streets like that. The old man found me a suit to wear. He said it didn't fit him anymore and I could keep it."

"All right," I said, seizing an opportunity to interrupt the flow. "You've answered my question. Now I know why you were wearing a suit the wrong size."

He shrugged again. He seemed to have forgotten where this had started.

It was a good moment to stop the video and take a break.

Morgan, the detective, watched the interview on the screen in my office, making sounds of dissent at regular intervals. When it was over, he asked, "Did you believe a word of that? The guy's a fantasist. He should be a writer."

"Some of it fits the facts," I pointed out. "I believe there was a circus here last weekend. And I know for certain that the cable-laying in the High Street caused some problems after it was done."

"The fact I'm concerned about is the killing of the old couple at twenty-nine, Steven Street, at the approximate time this Nathan was supposed to be on his way to the post."

"You made that clear to me yesterday," I said. "I put it to him today and he denies all knowledge of it."

"He's lying. His story's full of holes. You notice he ducked your question about having a letter in his hand?"

"Popping round to the post is only a form of words."

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"Meaning what?"

"Meaning he's going out. He needs space. He doesn't mean it literally."

"I'd put a different interpretation on it. It's his way of glossing over a double murder."

"That's a big assumption, isn't it?"

"He admitted walking up the left side of Steven Street."

"Well, he would. It's on his way to the High Street."

"You seem to be taking his side."

"I'm trying to hold on to the truth. In my work as a therapist, that's essential." I resisted the urge to point out that policemen should have a care for the truth as well.

"Are those his case notes on your desk?" Morgan said.

"Yes."

"Any record of violence?"

"You heard him. He's a softie."

"Soft in the head. The murders seem to have been random and without motive. A sweet old couple who never caused anyone any grief. In a case like this, we examine all the options, but I'd stake my reputation this was done by a nutter."

"That's not a term I use, Inspector."

"Call him what you like, we both know what I mean. A sane man doesn't go round cutting people's throats for no obvious reason. Nothing was taken. They had valuable antiques in the house and over two hundred pounds in cash."

"Would that have made it more acceptable in your eyes, murder in the course of theft?"

"I'd know where he was coming from, wouldn't I?"

"What about the crime scene? Doesn't that give you any information?"

"It's a bloody mess, that's for sure. All the forensic tests are being carried out. The best hope is that the killer picked up some blood that matches the old couple's DNA. He couldn't avoid getting some on him. If we had the clothes Nathan was wearing that afternoon, we'd know for sure. He seems to have destroyed everything. He's not so daft as he makes out."

"The suit he borrowed?"

"Went out with the rubbish collection, he says. It didn't fit, so it was useless to him, and the old man didn't want it back."

"Makes sense."

"Certainly does. We're assuming the killer stripped and took a shower at the house after the murders and then bundled his own clothes into a plastic sack and put on a suit from the old man's wardrobe. Very likely helped himself to some clean shoes as well."

"I'm no forensic expert, but if he did all that, surely he must have left some DNA traces about the house?"

"We hope so. Then we'll have him, and I look forward to telling

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you about it."

"What about the other suspect?"

There was a stunned silence. Morgan folded his arms and glared at me as if I was deliberately provoking him.

"Just in case," I said, "you may find it helpful to watch the video of an interview I did later this morning with a man called Jon."

I knew Jon from many hours of psychotherapy. He sat hunched, as always, hands clasped, eyes downturned, a deeply repressed, passive personality.

"Jon," my unseen voice said, "how long have you lived in that flat at the end of Steven Street?"

He sighed. "Three years. Maybe longer."

"That must be about right. I've been seeing you for more than two years. And you still live alone?"

A nod.

"You manage pretty well, shopping and cooking, and so on. It's an achievement just surviving in this modern world. But I expect there's some time left over. What do you enjoy doing most?"

"Don't know."

"Watching television?"

"Not really."

"You don't have a computer?"

He shook his head.

"Do you get out of the house, apart from shopping and coming here?"

"I suppose."

"You go for walks?"

He frowned as if straining to hear some distant sound.

"Just to get fresh air and exercise," I said. "You live in a nice area. The gardens are full of flowers in spring and summer. I think you do get out quite a bit."

"If you say so."

"Then I dare say you've met some of your neighbours, the people along Steven Street, when they're outside cleaning their cars, doing gardening, or walking the dog. Did you ever speak to the old couple at number twenty-nine?"

He started swaying back and forth in the chair. "I might have."

"They have a little toy dog, a Chihuahua. They're very attached to it, I understand."

"Don't like them," Jon said, still swaying.

"Why's that? Something they did?"

"Don't know."

"I think you do. Maybe they remind you of some people you knew once."

He was silent, but the rocking became more agitated. Momentarily his chin lifted from his chest and his face was visible.

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Fear was written large there.

"Could this old couple have brought to mind those foster parents you told me about in a previous session, when we discussed your childhood, the people who locked you in the cupboard under the stairs?"

He moaned a little.

"They had a small dog, didn't they?"

He covered his eyes and said, "Don't."

"All right," I said. "We'll talk about something else."

"You'll get thrown out of the union, showing me that," Morgan said. "Isn't there such a thing as patient confidentiality?"

"In the first place, I don't belong to a union," I said, "and in the second, I'm trying to act in the best interests of all concerned."

"Thinking he could kill again, are you?"

"Who are we talking about here?" I asked.

"The second man. Jon. He seems to have a thing about old people. He's obviously very depressed."

"That's his usual state. It doesn't make him a killer. I wanted you to look at the interview before you jump to a conclusion about Nathan, the other man."

"Nathan isn't depressed, that's for sure."

"Agreed. He has a more buoyant personality than Jon. Did you notice the body language? Nathan sits forward, makes eye contact, while Jon looks down all the time. You don't see much of his face."

"That stuff about the foster parents locking him in the cupboard. Is that true?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sure of it. I'd be confident of anything Jon tells me. He doesn't give out much, but you can rely on him. With Nathan I'm never sure. He has a fertile imagination and he wants to communicate. He's trying all the time to make his experiences interesting."

"Falling into the pond, you mean? Did you believe that?"

"It's not impossible. It would explain the change of clothes."

"I was sure he was talking bollocks, but now that you've shown me this other man I'm less confident. I'd like to question Jon myself."

"That won't be possible," I said.

He reddened. "It's a bit bloody late to put up the shutters. I've got my job to do and no one's going to stand in my way."

"Before you get heavy with me, Inspector, let me run a section of the second interview again. I'm going to turn off the sound and I want you to look closely at Jon. There's a moment when he sways back and the light catches his face."

I rewound the tape and let it play again, fast-forwarding until I found the piece I wanted, the moment I'd mentioned the old couple and Jon had started his swaying, a sure indicator of stress. "There."

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I used the freeze-frame function.

Jon's face was not quite in focus, but there was enough to make him recognisable.

"Christ Almighty," Morgan said. "It's the same guy. It's Nathan."

I let the discovery sink in.

"Am I right?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Then what the hell is going on?"

"This may be hard for you to accept. Nathan and Jon are two distinct identities contained in the same individual, a condition we know as Dissociative Identity Disorder. It used to be known as Multiple Personality Disorder, but we've moved on in our understanding. These so-called personalities are fragments of the same identity rather than self-contained characters. Jon is the primary identity, passive and repressed. Nathan is an alter ego, extrovert, cheerful and inventive."

"I've heard of this," Morgan said. "It's like being possessed by different people. I saw a film once."

"Exactly. Fertile material for Hollywood, but no entertainment at all if you happen to suffer with it. The disturbance is real and frightening. A subject can take on any number of personality states, each with its own self-image and identity. The identities act as if they have no connection with each other. My job is to deconstruct them and ultimately unite them into one individual. Jon and Nathan will become Jonathan."

"Neat."

"It may sound neat, but it's a long process."

"It's neat for me," he said. "I wasn't sure which of the two guys is the killer. Now I know there's only one of them, I've got him, whatever he calls himself."

"I wouldn't count on it," I said.

He shot me a foul look.

"The therapy requires me to find points of contact between the alter-personalities. When you came to me with this double murder, I could see how disturbing it would be for Jon. He carries most of the guilt. But this investigation of yours could be a helpful disturbance. It goes right back to the trauma that I think was the trigger for this condition, his ill-treatment at the hands of foster parents who happened to own a dog they pampered and preferred to the child."

"My heart bleeds," Morgan said, "but I have a job to do and two people are dead."

"So you tell me. Jon thinks he may have murdered them, but he didn't."

"Come off it," he said.

"Listen, please. Nathan's story was true. He really did have that experience with the balloon and the little dog and falling in the

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pond. For him—as the more positive of the identities—it was one more entertaining experience to relate. But for Jon, who experienced it also, it was disturbing, raising memories of the couple who fostered him and abused him. He felt quite differently, murderous even."

"Hold on," Morgan said. "Are you trying to tell me the murders never happened?"

"They happened in the mind of Jon, and they are as real to him as if he cut those old people's throats himself. But I promise you the old couple are alive and well. I went to Steven Street at lunchtime and spoke to them. They confirmed what Nathan told me."

"I don't get this. I'm thinking you're nuts as well."

"But it's important that you do get it," I told him. "There's a third identity at work here. It acts as a kind of conscience, vengeful, controlling, and ready to condemn. It, too, is convinced the murders took place and have to be investigated. Recognising this is the first step towards integration. Do me a favour and have another look at Jon's face. It's still on the screen."

He gave an impatient sigh and glanced at the image.

"Now look at this, Inspector."

I handed him a mirror. ●

by Bill Crider

Last month I talked about some "group blogs." This month I have a few more to tell you about. One is The Lipstick Chronicles (**http://thelipstickchronicles.typepad.com/**), where Harley Jane Kozak, Nancy Martin, Elaine Viets, Sarah Strohmeyer, and Michele Martinez, collectively known as the Book Tarts, hold forth. They all write books that combine elements of chick lit, mystery, and romance, and they make good company. Like most bloggers, they post about whatever interests them. Recently, Kozak posted on "Sex with Millionaires." (You'll just have to find it and read it.) Nancy Martin wrote about "Woman Rules Regarding Stubborn Men," and guest blogger Rebecca the Bookseller tried, with the help of the readers, to create the perfect music CD for travel.

A different kind of blog is *Nasty, Brutish, and Short* (**http://nasty-brutishshort.blogspot.com/**). There are plenty of sites where you can read book reviews, but this one is for short-story reviews. As far as I know, it's the only place you can find those right now. Here's a disclaimer: I'm one of the occasional reviewers. **(continued on p. 95)**

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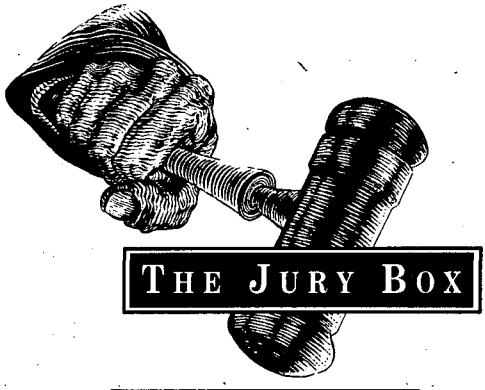

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Using the number of titles published as the measure, crime fiction must be at an all-time peak. And the Wall Street expression that a rising tide raises all boats also applies to the various mystery market sectors. For example, the pile from which I choose titles for this annual books-in-translation column is higher than ever. The eight new novels considered below represent seven languages and the same number of countries.

***** Åsa Larsson: *The Blood Spilt,* translated from the Swedish by Marlaine Delargy, Delacorte, $22. The second novel about attorney Rebecka Martinsson, already a leader in the contentious race for most cruelly tormented series character in crime fiction, concerns the murder of a female priest whose efforts to do good made enemies among her fellow villagers and professional colleagues. Illuminating issues of gender politics and the changing role of religion in 21st-century Europe, this beautifully written, faultlessly constructed novel is one of the finest crime novels of recent years, featuring both a complex victim, gradually revealed through flashbacks, and a complex killer. The subtly advanced theme is based on a familiar biblical parable.

**** Jan Costin Wagner: *Ice Moon,* translated from the German by John Brownjohn, Harcourt, $25. Here is an unusual and remarkably original variation on an overly familiar subgenre: the inverted detective story that alternates viewpoints of cop and serial killer. While mourning his recently deceased wife, Finnish police detective Kimmo Joentaa returns to work, investigating a series of crimes beginning with the smothering murder of a woman without obvious enemies. This outstanding novel fulfills the requirements of its type but shuns the expected suspense set-pieces and shocking reversals in favor of insights into personal, professional, and family relationships. **(continued on p. 141)**

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Benjamin's Demise

by Herschel Cozine

Detective McGrew settled back in a chair
In the den of the late Mr. Benjamin Blair,
With the butler, the maid, the cook and the wife,
And (in Benjamin's back) a most murderous knife.

Now which of the persons who stood in the den
Was the one who inserted the knife in poor Ben?
The fastidious butler, so prim and so proper?
The crochety cook, with her hair dyed like copper?
The maid, with her broom and her mop and her duster?
The beautiful wife—how could anyone trust her?

Detective McGrew thought in silence awhile,
Then rose from his chair with a satisfied smile.
"It wasn't the cook, and I'm sure I know why.
The knife is the finest that money can buy.
And would she have taken the finest, pray tell,
When any old knife would have served just as well?
And the butler's main duty, as everyone knows,
Is to clean and to care for the gentleman's clothes.
So I'm sure he would wait 'til the old boy was dressed
In something less fine than this elegant vest.
And the maid? Not a chance! She is tidy and neat.
Why, there isn't a speck of dust under our feet.
And to dirty the carpet to do the chap in
Would to her be a most unforgivable sin.
So, that leaves only one who would take the man's life:
None other than Benjamin's beautiful wife!"
And the unruffled wife gave a sigh and a shrug.
I'm so sorry," she said, "that I dirtied the rug."●

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Little Secrets

by Mike MacLean

He kicked me again, his foot smashing hard into my ribs. All at once, every ounce of oxygen tried to escape my body. I winced in pain and folded to the sidewalk. This wasn't turning out to be one of my better evenings.

I got to my hands and knees and coughed as if my lungs were filled with white-hot gravel. In desperation, I scanned the streets, hoping someone had seen the beating he had just given me. Maybe they'd get involved, call the cops. But it was almost one A.M. in a quiet residential neighborhood. The houses were all dark, and the only cars on the street sat empty by the curbs.

I was alone.

Malcolm White walked over to me as if he had all the time in the world. A few drops of blood speckled his Coke-bottle glasses. My blood. He slipped them off, wiping the lenses clean on the hem of his shirt.

Unable to get to my feet, I resigned myself to sitting on the sidewalk and looking up at him. "Was that kung fu?" I asked, gasping for breath. "A little Northern Shaolin, perhaps?"

White shook his head. "No. Japanese karate."

I rubbed my ribs. "Really? Because it sure felt like kung fu. Usually when I'm taking a butt-whupping, I can tell the difference."

He didn't laugh, didn't crack a smile. Instead, Malcolm White whispered, "This is for Kelly." Then he dropped to one knee, like a genuflecting Catholic, and hit me once more. It was a hard right hand, square to the base of the chin.

And, as the lights faded inside my head, I asked myself if taking this case had been such a good idea.

The first time I laid eyes on Rebecca King she was half naked and dripping wet. The afternoon sun shimmered off the Olympic swim-

Tempe, Arizona's Mike MacLean is a newcomer to *EQMM*. Readers may well have encountered his crime stories elsewhere, however. In 2006, his story "McHenry's Gift" was chosen for *Best American Mystery Stories*, edited by Scott Turow. He gives us an unconventional P.I. here, one who works "off the books." †

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ming pool at Arizona State University as healthy young coeds freestyled across the lanes. I barely noticed them. Rebecca King held my full attention.

"Miss King," I said, holding a beach towel open for her.

She hugged the edge of the pool, gazing up at me from the water. Her blond hair was wet and slick and her eyes were an icy Nordic blue. She was twenty-one, maybe twenty-two, but those eyes gave away an experience beyond her years.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"Only by reputation."

She tilted her head, giving me a quizzical glance. To her, I probably looked like an older grad student or a young professor, strolling poolside in his swim trunks and ASU T-shirt. I tried to blend into my surroundings whenever I could.

"We have some mutual friends," I said. "Ashley Powell mentioned you might have use for my services."

"I . . . I wasn't expecting you so soon."

"I believe in being punctual. Especially when money's involved."

Water dripped off every inch of her as she climbed out of the pool. She had the broad shoulders and muscled thighs of a competitive swimmer, but her body hadn't given up any of its womanly curves. I followed the slope of her full breasts past her flat stomach and down to her lush hips. She definitely had the goods to fill out a swimsuit. Conducting business at the pool had been my best idea in a long time.

Draping the towel over her shoulders, I whispered in her ear as if we were lovers. "I hear you have a problem. You want to tell me about it?"

"Right here? Now?"

"Sometimes, the best place for a secret is out in the open. No one listens in if they think you've got nothing to hide. Now come on, let's have a seat."

We found a table in the shade of the fitness center and sat across from each other. I sighed when she swathed herself in the towel, taking away my view.

"So tell me about your stalker," I said.

"Wait a minute, I don't know anything about you. I don't even know your name."

"And you never will. That's the arrangement. If you want a private investigator with a license and an office and a spunky secretary, go grab the yellow pages. Or you could always call the cops."

"No," she said, the word like a knife slash. "No police."

I smiled. "You got a little secret you want to keep under wraps? Maybe something on the shady side of the law?"

"You don't get to ask questions like that," she said, some steel in her voice.

"Fair enough. Tell me about your stalker."

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She hugged herself with the towel and the harsh Nordic eyes gave way to a little girl's dreamy stare. "I noticed him a week ago outside my dorm. The way he was dressed, I thought he might be a professor. Dockers and a generic polo shirt. Thick glasses. A sweater-vest kind of guy. You know the type?"

I nodded. "Go on."

"It was night, maybe nine o'clock, and I was keying in the access code for my building. He called my name and started walking towards me. At first I waited for him, thought maybe I knew the guy. Then I noticed the way he was moving—all stiff like. And his hands were balled up tight into fists."

"What did you do?"

"I got inside fast. He pounded on the door a few times, shouting my name. I ran to the nearest phone and called campus security. But by the time they arrived, he was gone."

"But not gone for good," I said.

"No. He showed up a week later, did the same thing. And I spotted him when I was out with my friends at Casey Moore's. We were on the patio one night, having a few drinks, and he drove by—very slowly. He had his dome light on inside his car. I think he wanted me to see him."

"What kind of car?"

"A Neon. Navy blue, maybe black."

"Did you get the plate number?"

"No. I was too freaked out."

"Okay. What else?"

She gazed down at the tabletop. "I told my friend Bobby Riggins about it. Bobby's on the football team. Defensive tackle. He sits the bench most games, but he's a big guy. Tough too. Anyway, Bobby said he would take care of the guy for me. But . . . I don't know what happened. Bobby won't talk to me. He's in the hospital with four broken ribs and a punctured lung."

She went mute. Behind us, college girls splashed around in the pool.

"What exactly do you want me to do, Miss King?" I asked. "Find out why he's bothering you? Find out who he is?"

"I don't care who he is," she said coldly. "Just make him stop. Any way you can."

The next seventy-two hours dripped by at a convict's pace.

I followed Rebecca King from a distance as she trekked across campus from one class to another. The first day wasn't bad. It was cool for an Arizona spring, and the university was full of green grass, shady trees, and beautiful young girls. But soon, the boredom kicked in.

Fifteen hours every day, I watched Rebecca King's back. When she finished her classes, I tailed her to the grocery store, the coffee

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shop, the laundromat. Wherever she went, I was there—her constant shadow. I checked faces in the crowd and cars in the street, always on the lookout for the "sweater-vest guy" she had described.

It wasn't until midnight on a Tuesday that I hit pay dirt.

A secluded bench sat a few dozen yards from Rebecca's dorm, hidden among thick palm tress and creosote bushes. For hours, I camped out on that spot, watching and waiting.

I was about to call it a night when I spotted him. He was marching towards Rebecca's building, hands thrust deep in his pockets. Mr. Sweater Vest. Mr. Coke-Bottle Glasses.

He was a painfully average-looking man, someone you wouldn't look at twice. Just under six feet tall, he had thinning brown hair and narrow shoulders that slumped forward like a desk jockey's. He didn't seem to be the kind of guy who'd put a college football player in the hospital. But I tried hard not to judge a man on first impressions. I'd learned that lesson the hard way.

He glanced over his shoulder, then rattled the door. Finding it locked, he circled around to the east entrance and rattled that one too. When neither door granted him access, he stood for a long time, staring flatly into the bricks of the building.

What was he thinking?

Instead of confronting the man, I crept behind him as he broke away from the dorms and walked to a parking structure on the south end of campus. I kept to the shadows and treaded lightly so he wouldn't hear me. These were things I was good at.

He drove a blue Neon, just like Rebecca had said. From my hiding place behind a pillar, I made a mental note of the plate number, then watched him pull out of the lot and into the empty midnight streets.

"Gotcha," I whispered.

Three o'clock the next afternoon, I drove a mile from my hole of an apartment to a gas station I'd never been to before. I fed two quarters into a pay phone and punched in Rebecca's cell-phone number.

"Hello," she answered, almost shouting. Behind her, I could hear the soundtrack of campus life—student chatter, laughter, radios in the quad. Meanwhile, I inhaled exhaust fumes and listened to revving engines.

"I found your boyfriend," I told her.

"Who is he?"

"One Malcolm White. Thirty-seven-year-old resident of Scottsdale, Arizona. Single, no kids. Lives alone and works as a case manager for a temp agency. You ever hear of him?"

There was a five-second pause. I counted. When she finally answered, her voice was strained. "No."

"Sure you haven't. But that's your business, isn't it?"

"Just tell me what you found out."

"I caught him creeping around your building last night. Ran his

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plate and did a full background check—credit report, criminal records, the works. Turns out your guy is spick-and-span clean. He got a parking ticket two years ago, but that's about it. Now why would a guy like that give a nice college girl so much trouble?"

"Did you find out where he lives?" she asked.

I pulled a computer printout from my back pocket. "Got his address right in front of me."

"Are you going to make him stop?"

"I can talk to him," I said. "Put on the tough-guy act. That usually works."

"I don't want *usually*. I want him to leave me alone."

"In that case, I get nasty. But getting nasty is risky. And risky is going to cost you. Let's say another five thousand on top of what you're already paying me. In cash."

There was another pause; this time it lasted a good ten seconds. She held her breath the whole time. "Fine," she said. "Another five thousand. I'm good for it."

"Oh, I know you are," I said. "I did a credit check on you, too. Tell me something, where does a young college girl get so much money?"

The line clicked dead. I guessed Rebecca King wasn't in the mood for sharing.

Midnight rolled around, and I got dressed for the part—black cargo pants, black T-shirt, black boots.

The address on the printout led me to a modest neighborhood in Scottsdale, a city known for its trendy restaurants and million-dollar homes. In contrast, Malcolm White's abode was a 'fifties track house built in typical Arizona ranch style. It was a dinky place, maybe two bedrooms, but it had been freshly painted and its lawn was green and well kept.

I cruised by slowly, then parked a few blocks away in the dark corner of a Quickie Mart. Before getting out of the car, I reached under the passenger seat and lugged out the .357 Smith & Wesson.

No, I told myself. *The gun stays.* After all, this was just a reconnaissance mission. No moves would be made tonight.

I slid the gun back under the seat, thinking about Rebecca's friend, the one in the hospital with the cracked ribs and torn lung. I hoped leaving the pistol wasn't a big mistake.

An alleyway snaked behind the old neighborhood. I followed it, counting off houses until I reached White's place. The rear gate was locked, so I pulled myself up over the fence and dropped silently into his backyard. I immediately scanned the grass for dog feces or chew toys and was grateful not to find any. The last thing I wanted was some overgrown Rottweiler sniffing me out.

I crept closer to the house, checking the windows and doors for signs of a security system. As far as I could tell, they were clean. There were no sensor lights, either. Getting into White's place

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undetected would be a cakewalk.

Satisfied with my scouting mission, I took the front gate through White's carport, edged past his Neon, and walked out onto the driveway.

That's where my heart came to a full and complete stop.

"Did you get a good look at the place?" asked Malcolm White. He stood at the end of the drive, arms crossed over his chest. Yellow light from a nearby street lamp gleamed off his thick glasses.

"I came to talk," I said, lying through my teeth.

White let his arms uncoil down to his sides. "If you wanted to talk, why didn't you approach me last night at the dorm?"

I tried not to show my surprise. Either I was getting sloppy in my old age or this guy knew how to spot a tail. "You're going to stay away from Rebecca King," I told him.

"Stay away?"

"That's right."

"You want me to stay away?" said White. Anger bubbled inside of him, rising to the surface. "After what she did."

I wanted to ask exactly what Rebecca had done to him, but White never gave me the chance. He marched straight at me, his fists clenched into knots of bone and rough flesh.

"After what she did," he said again, shouting now.

One word flashed in my mind, like a blinking Christmas light. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* I should've brought the gun.

"Relax, pal," I said, holding up my palms, the international signal for *Calm down*. But it was all an act. I was playing possum so he would hesitate. Too bad it didn't work.

White closed the distance between us so quickly I had to step back as I threw a right cross. The punch caught him dead between the eyes but didn't have any weight behind it. White's head barely jerked backwards.

He bulled forward, smashing me with an elbow strike, then following up with a back fist to the nose. I heard the cartilage crack, and my blood squirted the lenses of his glasses.

When I finally got my hands up to protect my face, he caught me with a solid side kick to the ribs. Not once but twice. The first kick sent me tumbling backwards. The second one put me on the ground.

"Was that kung fu?" I asked, gasping for breath. "A little Northern Shaolin, perhaps?"

Ten seconds later, Malcolm White knocked me unconscious. But right before doing so, he whispered something. The words ricocheted in my skull as the darkness came to claim me.

"This is for Kelly."

I woke up in a hospital emergency room, a little flashlight shining in my eyes.

"Welcome back to the living," said a woman's voice.

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The haze cleared from my vision and I was able to make out her face. She was Asian, with deep crow's-feet and streaks of gray running through her hair. Genius that I am, I noticed her scrubs and stethoscope and deduced that she was a doctor.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Funny," said the doctor, putting her penlight away. "I was going to ask you the same thing. All we know is, you have a mild concussion, a few bruised ribs, and a broken nose. My guess is, you had some sort of strange ballroom-dancing accident."

Outside of the examining room, I heard people coughing and moaning, waiting in the lobby for their turn. "How'd I get here?"

"Some guy dropped you off. He left before the security guard had a chance to talk to him. Drove a Dodge Neon, if that means anything to you."

I shook my head, pretending it meant nothing.

"Not a big talker, eh?" said the doctor. "That's okay, it's not my job to make friends with you." She took hold of my head and pressed her thumbs against my cheekbones, close to the broken nose. Even through the clotted blood, I could smell her latex gloves.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Before we do anything else, I need to set this nose in place. Otherwise, you'll look like a gangster for the rest of your life."

"Is it going to hurt?"

"What do you think?" she asked.

After signing half a million medical forms, I called a cab from the lobby and stepped outside to wait for it. A cool breeze swept across the hospital parking lot, pulling along the scent of desert flowers and citrus blossoms. Of course, having cotton balls shoved up my nostrils, I could barely smell any of it.

I must have been quite a sight with my red, swollen nose and purple, punch-drunk face. Luckily, I'd worn a black T-shirt instead of a white one. Blood doesn't show up on black fabric so much.

Yeah, really lucky, I thought.

Waiting for the taxi, I let my mind wander through the facts of the case. Two names kept repeating themselves over and over. *Bobby Riggins* and *Kelly.*

Ten minutes later, my cab rolled into the parking lot and pulled up to the curb. I dug a twenty from my wallet and slipped it to the driver.

"Keep the meter running."

I jogged back into the hospital, bypassing the ER for the regular admissions ward. Fortunately, the front desk was empty, but the computer was up and running.

I sat down behind the monitor and scanned its screen for anything having to do with patient records. Finding an "Admittance" folder, I clicked opened the program and typed "Riggins" into a

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search prompt. There were a few patients with that last name, but no Bobbys or Roberts.

Next, I typed in "White, Kelly" on the chance that Kelly and Malcolm were related. One hit appeared on the screen. A Kelly White had been admitted to the hospital almost two weeks ago. She was still booked in the ICU.

"What do you think you're doing?" said a husky woman's voice behind me.

"Fishing," I said, swiveling in the chair. I immediately locked stares with a middle-aged gal whose blue/black hair practically screamed "dye job." She wore a nurse's scrubs, but the pen behind her ear and the carpal-tunnel brace on her wrist told me she was the ward's receptionist.

"Those records are for hospital staff only," she said sternly.

"No problem," I said. "I'm just on my way out."

A sick wheezing sound reverberated through the empty stairwell of ASU's Language & Literature building. I hunkered down on the landing, listening to heavy footsteps trudge towards me.

"You're late for class," I said. "How come you didn't take the elevator?"

A beefy kid hauled himself up the stairs, gripping the handrail, his square jaw clenched tightly. He was a typical jock, in a Cowboys jersey and a baseball cap pulled down almost to his eyes. "Are you kidding me?" he said. "Have you ever ridden the elevator in this place? You'd have better luck betting on the Cardinals."

I smiled. "Still, all these stairs must be hard on you. Especially with that punctured lung of yours. Not so easy getting around, is it, Bobby?"

Bobby Riggins stared at me hard. "Do I know you, dude?"

"Nope. But we have a mutual friend."

"Yeah? Who's that?"

"Malcolm White," I said, touching my swollen nose. "He did a number on me too."

The kid's face went pale. "I have to get to class."

"White has a little sister," I said. "Her name's Kelly. She's a freshman here, living in the same dorm as Rebecca King. At least, she did live there. Right now, her home is the ICU of Saint Luke's. In a coma, from what I understand."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Riggins.

He tried to brush past me, but I gave him a short uppercut to the solar plexus. Not hard enough to be a bone-breaker, but enough to do the job.

Eyes wide, Riggins clutched his chest and went down to one knee. His breathing was short and labored. "Christ, watch it, dude! My doctor says I can't take any shots like that. I could open up the lung again."

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"Then you better start talking," I said, cracking my knuckles. "What happened to Kelly White?"

The Spy Shop sat tucked in a corner strip mall, a few miles from the university. It was a little specialty store that sold surveillance cameras, anti-bugging equipment, and self-defense products—anything a wannabe James Bond could possibly desire.

Roaming the shelves, I punched a number into my cell phone. Normally, I used a landline for business calls, but I intended to keep this conversation brief.

Rebecca King picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hey there, Becky."

"What do you want?" she asked abruptly.

"Funny you should ask. I was thinking my fee's still a little light."

She took a breath and held it. "You can't keep doing this. We had a deal."

"And now the deal has changed. You can thank your friend Bob for that. He spilled his guts about Kelly. About what you made her do."

Rebecca went quiet again, most likely thinking her options over. The little Spy Shop seemed to shrink around me as I waited for her response.

"How much?" she asked finally.

"Let's make it ten thousand even. You can forget my daily expenses. What a bargain, huh?"

"And you'll make sure he doesn't bother me again?"

"I'll take care of Malcolm, you just worry about getting that money together. I'll swing by for it after the job is done."

"Just curious," Rebecca said, "but how do you know for sure I'll pay up?"

I tapped the display case, letting the sales clerk know I wanted to see one of the self-defense products behind the glass. I held the weapon up to the light. It was black and glossy and felt good in my hand. "I trust you," I told her.

Malcolm White stepped out of the temp agency and locked the doors behind him. He was the last one out of the building and his blue Neon sat alone in the parking lot.

Perfect, I thought.

The setting sun gave me some shadows to work with. I kept completely still, crouched behind a big potted plant, waiting for White to get closer. As he passed my hiding place, I fell into step behind him. I gripped my new toy tightly and tried to slow down my racing pulse.

"Nice night, isn't it, Malcolm?"

White froze in his tracks, an instant statue. Then he tried to spin around to face me. This time, I was too quick for him. I jabbed the stun gun into his neck and sent 600,000 hot volts rampaging

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through his nervous system. White jerked like a trout yanked out of the water. He twitched a few times, then his body crumpled to the blacktop.

"Sorry about that," I said. "Couldn't risk you using any more of that kung fu on me."

White sat up, straightening his glasses. "Karate," he said, correcting me.

"Whatever." I switched the stun gun to my left hand and pulled the Smith & Wesson from the waistband of my jeans. I expected some sort of reaction from White—some fear in his eyes, maybe a little begging. But he only looked at the big revolver and sighed, a sad, lonely look etched into his face.

"Are you going to shoot me?" he asked.

"I haven't decided yet. Why don't you tell me about your sister?"

"Kelly? Why would you want to know about her?"

"I have a gun," I said. "Humor me."

White nodded, as if the idea of talking pleased him. "Kelly and Rebecca lived in the same dorm, became friends the first day of classes. Rebecca was like the cool big sister Kelly never had. They did everything together. It didn't take long for Kelly to become infatuated. That's the kind of girl she is. Smart and pretty, but with low self-esteem. The perfect victim for someone like Rebecca King."

I kept silent, letting him talk his piece.

"Midway through the semester, Kelly started having money problems. She didn't get the grant she wanted and couldn't pay for her spring class load. It was a huge blow to her. Then Rebecca came up with this bright idea. She figured out a way Kelly could stay in school. And it would only cost her one night of her life."

"What happened?"

White was still on the blacktop, hugging his knees now like a child would. "There are men in this world," he said, "who'll pay a lot of money to have a night with an eighteen-year-old girl. They'll pay even more if they can be rough with her. Bobby Riggins was supposed to wait outside the room, make sure Kelly was safe. He didn't do his job very well."

I crouched down to my haunches so White and I could see eye to eye. "Did you ever find the guy? The one who hurt your sister?"

"Yeah. Bobby told me all about him. But not without some convincing." White let out an angry laugh. "The man was a real-estate agent. I caught him alone in one of his properties. Left him on the imitation hardwood floors, bleeding. I can't tell you for sure if he's alive or dead. It doesn't really matter anymore."

"Why not?"

A faraway look fell like a shadow over White's face. "It's all my fault, you see? Kelly asked me for the money for school, but I turned her away. And now I might never hear her voice again."

The last of the day's sunlight shined off the barrel of my .357.

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White gazed at the gleaming chrome as if it was a flickering prayer candle. "So now that you've heard my story," he said, "are you going to use that thing?"

I hefted the revolver, bringing it up like a duelist would. "Yeah, I'm going to use it. Just not the way you think."

Before White could say another word, I bent over and pressed the stun gun hard against his chest. 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . I counted and watched his teeth clamp together as his body trembled with angry electricity.

After he passed out, I aimed the Smith & Wesson into the air and pulled the trigger six times as fast as I could. Then I wiped the revolver clean and clamped it in White's hand.

By the time the sirens closed in, I was long gone.

Rebecca King met me where it had all begun, poolside at the ASU fitness center. She sat at a table this time, dressed in shorts and a tank top instead of her swimsuit. She wore sunglasses and sipped iced tea, just another coed enjoying the spring sunshine.

"I liked you better all wet," I said, pulling up a chair. I swiped her iced tea and took a long drink from its straw.

"Is it over?" she asked.

I grabbed a Manila folder from my gym bag and slid out a few snapshots. "These were taken outside a Scottsdale police precinct. He's being held there right now, waiting on the judge to set his preliminary hearing."

Rebecca eyed the photographs—Malcolm White in the back of a squad car—White in handcuffs flanked by two uniformed officers—White being led into the precinct detention center. "I told you I didn't want the police involved," Rebecca said. Her jaw was tight with tension.

"Don't worry. His arrest has nothing to do with you. It seems Mr. White unlawfully discharged a firearm within city limits. Unfortunately for him, the weapon in question was used in an armed robbery last week."

"You planted a gun on him? A gun you used in a robbery?"

"They'll hold White for a few days for questioning," I said. I decided not to tell her that I wasn't a stickup artist. I just bought the gun from one.

Rebecca sat back in her chair, squinting at me in the sunlight. "How do I know he won't come after me again once he gets out of jail?"

"I had a long talk with the guy. You won't be seeing him again. If you do, just call me. I'll take care of it, free of charge." I stole her tea again and took another long sip. "Now about my money . . ."

Rebecca suddenly found her shoes very interesting. "I have it," she said, her eyes avoiding mine. "Most of it."

"How much?"

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"Eight thousand three hundred." When she heard my frustrated sigh, she reached across the table and touched my hand. "I'll get you the rest later. I promise. Until then, maybe I can compensate you in another way."

I slowly stood up and gazed down at her, letting her sweat a little under the weight of my fifty-yard stare. Then I fished a card out of my back pocket. On the front, it was plain, except for one of my highjacked cell-phone numbers. On the back, I scribbled an address. "I'll be staying at the Hotel San Carlos for the next week. Room number two-oh-six. Why don't you come visit me Thursday night?"

"Thursday night," she repeated, smirking. "But you know, I'm not like Kelly. I won't do any of the rough stuff."

"Don't worry about me, Becky. I'm nothing if not a gentleman."

A pair of beefy corrections officers led Malcolm White into the conference room and removed his leg shackles. They kept his handcuffs on, sat him down in a chair across from mine, and then filed out the door without saying a word.

White eyed my cheap suit and imitation leather briefcase. "How did you get in here?"

"Told them I was your lawyer."

He tried to fight off a grin, but failed. "You're some piece of work."

"That's the general consensus," I said. "What are they charging you with?"

"I'm not sure. Crazy as it sounds, I think they might believe my story. I've got no criminal record. And I was working the night your gun was used in the robbery."

"Lucky you."

Smiling, White nodded, then rested his handcuffed wrists on the table between us. He leaned in close to me, as if he was trying to inspect the pores on my nose. "Are you here to threaten me?"

"What if I say yes?"

White shrugged sadly. His eyes went vacant. "I found out from the public defender that Kelly passed away last night. She couldn't fight anymore. And now I'm alone. Just me and my guilt. What more can you do to me?"

I snapped open the briefcase and removed a single white business card.

"What's this?" he asked, holding the card up in the dim light.

"The address of the San Carlos Hotel," I said. Then I reached back into my case and pulled out a standard business-size envelope. "And when you get out, this will be waiting for you with your personal possessions."

Behind the Coke-bottle glasses, Malcolm White narrowed his gaze at me. "I don't understand. What's in it?"

"The key to room two-oh-six," I said. "Rebecca King will be paying a visit there Thursday night. Tell her I said hi." ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

DEVOURED

by Ruth Francisco

1.

Chuffing, snuffling, snorting, the bear circles the tent knocking around an empty pot, the ground sagging under his weight, his rancid-sweet bear smell saturating the moist air. An aluminum support for the supply tent clatters to the ground, startling the bear. The bear huffs angrily, bouncing back, shaking the earth.

"Somebody is curious out there," he says, amused, getting up out of his sleeping bag, moving, as he does, like a kid playing dodge ball, swiftly, clumsily, boisterously.

"Don't go out there," she whispers.

"Don't worry. I just have to defend my territory."

He unzips the tent and yells, "Hey, get out of here!"

As he steps out into the dark.

2.

Rain rattles down on the nylon tent. A gust of wind pops the outside fly. The bare branches of the alder trees clack against each other like the bones of skeletons.

It is late in the season, early October, on a rugged peninsula in

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Alaska. The air is cold and damp, the wind chilling, the light dim and sepia-toned. The weary sun barely inches over the horizon before sagging again below the mountains. The mud flats that stretch a quarter of a mile to the ocean at low tide are empty. A few male bears crowd the creek, aggressive, hungry still.

The man and the woman had planned to leave, had indeed left once already, taking a floatplane to Kodiak Island, intending to catch a jet to Anchorage, then on to Los Angeles. They were looking forward to their return to Malibu, to the dull predictability of traffic, sun, and socializing. To television and cell phones. To a much-needed hibernation of the human soul—for the fight for survival in the wild, while exhilarating, is exhausting.

Ruth Francisco writes mainstream as well as crime novels, and the following story does not fall quite squarely into the crime genre. We include it because it maintains superb suspense throughout—quite a feat given that most readers will recall a real-life incident on which it appears to be based. The California author's latest novel is *The Secret Memoirs of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.* †

Gillian's departing ticket was for two weeks ago. He had tried to leave with her. But the airline wouldn't change his ticket unless he paid the difference between his discounted fare and the normal price—airline policy—which, of course, was more than the cost of his original ticket. So they returned to the Grizzly Maze. After expressing indignation—"Goddamn corporate bullshit!" After *he* expressed indignation. After he was asked by security guards to leave the terminal.

3.

The floatplane took off, an orange bumblebee buzzing up into the air, bouncing on the turbulence, leaving them. Neither of them moved until they no longer heard the plane's engine.

They looked around as if assessing their chances for survival. Their gear, in orange and green waterproof bags, was lined up on the shore. It was only for two more weeks . . . and yet . . . they were so alone. It felt as if they were facing a self-imposed punitive sentence.

They were there because the world of men had gone desperately wrong, and they clung to something wild and savage and real that made sense to them. One last glimpse before returning to that other world. Yet they felt a strange foreboding, as if they had disobeyed the warning of their fairy godmother—*Leave at midnight. Don't look back!*

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The world they returned to appeared to be fading, its color seeping away in a slow dissolve. As if a spell had worn off, and the summer paradise of turquoise lakes, blueberries, and salmon-filled creeks was slipping away into a twilight zone, a barren moonscape, dun and dingy.

The sedge grasses were dusty brown, five feet high, waving as if combed by an invisible brush. The yellow leaves of the willows swayed and fluttered in the wind. The sky was violently alive: heavy gray cumulonimbus, speeding white cirrus, weighty black altostratus, churning nimbostratus, clouds so dense and volatile that one could almost hear them rumbling in on enormous wheels.

The bears should be gone, but several older males, underweight and hungry, lingered, prowling and scavenging. Restless. Like thieving crows, they grabbed what they could, swiping up the cohos, the dying salmon that had already spawned. The bears sensed the winter would be long and severe. They felt the long-nailed witch called starvation scratching at the soft part of their bellies.

They were there, alone and together, man, woman, bear.

His body relaxed as soon as the plane disappeared into the mist. He turned and looked at her almost as if he were surprised she was there. His anger was gone, his eyes taking on a gray, watery look.

He looked chastened, she thought, wearing the face of a young man dropped off in front of his childhood home, who must pick up his bags, enter the house, and face the parents he fled in shame. Or perhaps he wore the face of a soldier returning from war, a soldier who planned never to leave home again.

He has returned to finish something, she thought.

Without speaking, he threw a pack on his back, picked up a bag in either hand, and trudged up the hill.

4.

"I'm glad you came back with me," he says while playing with the ends of her hair, making a brush to tickle his nose. "I'm such an asshole sometimes. It's just like every time I go back, someone tries to break my balls."

He means back to civilization.

Their sleeping bags are zipped together, their legs intertwined. He tucks his long white feet between her calves to warm his toes. Their breath is visible inside the tent. Their noses are moist and red. They lean on their elbows, tilting toward the Coleman lamp, which gives a little heat, nibbling trail mix to keep their jaws moving and warm.

"I've got my bears, I've got my woman, I've got good munchies. It doesn't get any better than this."

Gillian smiles, knowing that he is as uncomfortable as she is in the gloomy cold. He is a bon vivant, a self-indulgent surfer-dude

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sort of fellow, not an outdoorsman at all, not really, but one who endures discomfort for his bears. She smiles, loving his daily refrain, *It doesn't get any better than this,* a California cliché, a prayer perhaps, a patter of words he uses to express what? Gratitude? Happiness? Hope?

He lifts her chin to kiss her. "I wish we didn't have to leave."

But of course they must. The bears are departing for their dens up in the mountains. Soon there will only be snow and sleet storms. Soon even the sun will leave and the maze will return to Hades, to alder tunnels of darkness, skies filled with clouds, black and heavy, oppressing the earth. No place for any living creature.

"We'll always have Malibu," she says, inching her hand up his chest under his flannel shirt and his thermal underwear, her fingers cold, tickling him. He grins, aroused, the very word *Malibu* conjuring up images of hot tubs and sun and sex, long lingering meals of fresh vegetables and fish, pink sunrises, and midnight swims under the stars.

A bear shuffles up the path to their left, a double lane of dirt with a ridge of grass growing up between, worn down by thousands of years of bear feet plodding to the creek.

He cocks his head, eyes bright. "Sounds like we have a visitor."

"Maybe he'll go away," she pleads, sensing that the low roar that has been rumbling over the horizon, kept at bay by some miracle, is finally there to lay claim. The day before they leave.

The bear will make us pay. For this happiness.

5.

Several months ago at a party in Beverly Hills, he introduced Gillian for the first time to his friends, putting his arm around her to shepherd her from one room to another, yet not letting it linger on her waist, not declaring "coupledom." He seemed to know everyone. She had been astonished at how easily he moved from one cluster to another, with the social skills of a politician, so confident, slapping backs, smiling, tipping his head to listen, then reacting exuberantly, rocking back and forth and bobbing his head, several friends shouting, "Hey, Bear Man!" and others asking how his grizzly brethren were, and the women, all stunningly beautiful, dressed in tight, sparkling outfits, and made-up as if they were going to the Oscars, all eyeing him over someone's shoulder, as if waiting for a chance to talk with him. "It's the bears," he'd joked later. "It drives women nuts." He introduced her to the host of the party, his good friend Randy Lloyd, and Randy's current girlfriend, Zuni Blake, both names obviously made up, and Gillian wondered if anyone in L.A. used the name they were born with, or if anyone was who he said he was, everyone spinning a history that they were sure was more interesting than the one they had.

She had been surprised each time something she had assumed

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was true about him turned out not to be true. His name wasn't really his name. He wasn't an orphan. He wasn't Australian. Had he really been up for the part of one of the bartenders on *Cheers*? Had he really been a swim star? Or a beach bum? Or a waiter in Malibu? Did he really live with the bears?

She tried not to worry about it—what was true and what was not. It was clear that he'd had a horrible split from his family, and now that he was sober, he wanted nothing to do with the man he had once been. Why shouldn't he reinvent himself? Every time you met someone new, you reinvented yourself, redefining yourself, editing, exaggerating. Here in L.A. the lies were merely grander. Wasn't she also trying to reinvent herself? Surely that was part of what attracted her to him—that by becoming part of his life, she would be transformed into someone new, someone who was not timid and passive and guilty and reticent, but someone bold and beautiful.

When the Bear Man went to find them bottled water, Randy took her by the elbow to the pool, eager, it seemed, to get to know her. He had a wide, kind face, hair he was letting go gray, and big white teeth. It seemed strange to her that everyone she met in California, even clerks at the supermarket, had big white teeth, as if prepared at any time to do a toothpaste commercial. Randy was famous for a sitcom he had costarred in over a decade ago, and other small parts, but he wasn't so famous that he had to worry about paparazzi. She wondered why he was so interested in her. He obviously cared about the Bear Man, wanting to know how they had met and where she was from, and if she was "into" bears too. He seemed—despite the high spirits and posturing—warm and genuine, and she could imagine him as a sheriff of a small town, a part that he had played in a movie not long ago.

As she talked with Randy, she caught glimpses of the Bear Man in another room. Loose-limbed as a dancing scarecrow, he flounced from one set of people to another, grinning, tossing his blond hair from his forehead. He appeared transformed from backwoodsman to star. Even his black flannel shirt and jeans looked chic, whereas her clothes—she had in fact put on a dress—looked out of place. Her face, her hair—it was all wrong—drab, lifeless, boring.

She wondered how she could ever mean anything to someone who knew so many people, who had known so many women—and if she could ever really know someone with such a long past, a past that he so defiantly refused. Yet every once in a while he would say something so perceptive, so startling, that she fell in love all over again. Perhaps he, like the bear, was waiting to see if he could really trust her; then he would reveal himself.

How careful she'd been not to scare him off, not to ask questions, not to drive him away with "her needs." *Never ask about girlfriends, never ask about the future, never demand commitment.* That, she

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knew, was the fastest way to lose any man. She had to view their "friendship" as a gift and "go with the flow."

Could she do it? It took so much restraint.

From across the room, he caught her eye, a glint of jealousy flaring—merely a nanosecond—then disappearing in a grin. He came bouncing back and grabbed Randy and her by the shoulders in a group hug. "It doesn't get any better than this!"

Randy liked her, approved of her, she could tell. He seemed protective of her, as if standing in for her big brother, and she wondered if it was the nature of actors to assume whatever role they thought was called for, as if life were improvisational theater.

"She might be the one, B-Man," Randy said, pulling him aside yet within earshot. "You better hold on to her."

The Bear Man jerked back his head, playing at being offended. *Or was he?* "Bears are opportunists, Randy. They aren't monogamists."

"But, my friend—" Randy replied, winking at her a few feet away—"you aren't a bear. Not really."

6.

"Hey, get out of here!" He rips open the zipper and jerks his head out. "Get out! Go on! Get, get, get!"

As he stumbles out of the tent, his big toe catches on the bottom zipper, making him swim with his arms to catch his balance. He claps his hands overhead and bellows and roars, the sudden chill of the ground on his bare feet fueling his impersonation of rage. He is not in a hurry; he zips the tent behind him to keep out the rain. "Go on, you beast! Get out of here!"

He charges, jumping into the air, yelling, enjoying the energizing physicality of it, a yell that says, *Damn you all! I'm still here with the bears! Damn you to hell!*

He is not frightened. Not really. Perhaps he has been around the bears for too long to be cautious. Perhaps he no longer cares. He is confident that the bear will twist away and retreat. That the bear will believe his bluff.

As it has done so many times before.

He knows the bear, a scarred, moth-eaten old boar with broken brown teeth and a droopy lower jaw. He has given him a name, as he anoints all the bears he observes with names. He has confronted this bear before, and the bear has always shimmied away. A bear with little to prove. A bear that wants only to be left alone.

But a bear that needs to be stood up to.

He charges, confident that the bear will gallop off, dragging its belly through the sedge grass. He does not hesitate.

But perhaps the bear is hungry, his metabolism in overdrive, his stomach roiling with insatiable cravings.

Perhaps the bear can see behind the man's bluff. Perhaps it

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senses the difference between the bluff that can turn serious in an instant, the bluff that demands respect, and the bluff of a man so in love that he no longer has the heart to discipline.

Perhaps the bear can smell a different pheromone. Or can hear a different inflection in his voice. Perhaps he sees a hint of a smile on the man's face.

Perhaps the bear is in a bad mood.

Perhaps it doesn't like the weather.

The man charges, his naked feet slapping in the cold puddles. He stops just short of the beast, waving his arms, growling fiercely.

The bear rears up on its hind legs, looming eleven feet into the sky, saliva dripping from its crooked jaw, and roars.

7.

"It's gonna be a bit bumpy at first," the bush pilot warned on her first visit to the Grizzly Maze. The floatplane lifted and fell with each current, hitting pockets of turbulent air, jolting them. "Once we get out over the ocean, we'll smooth out." The clouds swirled around them. They flew through whiteness, then burst into the clear, the houses of Kodiak Island beneath them almost too sharp, too defined, too real.

"We almost never get calm weather like this in September," the pilot said, trying to put her at ease. "We really lucked out."

They sailed out over the rippling turquoise water. The sun was bright and hot. She began to enjoy herself. The pleasant drone of the plane engine. The pilot singing a tune she knew she was supposed to recognize by the way he winked at her, probably from some popular rock band from before her time.

They passed around the island to the far side so he could land with the northwestern wind behind him. A ring of extinct volcanoes jutted into the air, blue on the bottom fading to lavender at the top. The snowy tops were shrouded in donuts of fog, and their sides were streaked with culverts still filled with snow, giving them the look of wrinkled prunes.

"Pretty, ain't it?" The pilot smiled, dipping the right wing to give her a clear view of the ground below.

The intensity of the blues almost hurt—the sky, the lakes, the mountains. She realized that none of those things—air, water, earth—was actually blue; the blue vanished as they drew nearer, an illusion, a play of light. Blue was the color of things in the distance, the color of longing. She felt a twinge of panic—perhaps it was better not to get too close. Perhaps it was better to keep some things in the realm of desire, beyond attainment, things like love and happiness. In a haze of blue.

The beauty was alluring—like some secret paradise, Shangri-La or Atlantis, an imaginary fantasy island. She got the feeling that she was crossing over into the unknown.

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"I'll give you the tour," the pilot said. "We'll stay up pretty high so we don't bother the bears too much.

He flew between the mountains following a creek that emptied into the ocean. The stream led them to two enormous navy blue lakes surrounded by green hills of spruce and yellowing aspen. The lakes were connected by a roiling creek. "Why is the creek red?" Gillian asked.

"Salmon," the pilot shouted. "They turn red after they spawn."

Along the shore were fields of golden grass crosshatched with paths. The wider paths led from the water and disappeared into a jungle of alder trees. The shore was dotted with a herd of animals. "Caribou?" asked Gillian.

The pilot smiled widely. "Bear."

"You can't be serious. So many? So close together?"

"Welcome to the Grizzly Maze." He barked a laugh—her face must have showed her astonishment, her terror. Bear were all over the place. Probably a hundred or more.

The pilot brought the floatplane down on the water and taxied up to the shore. The Bear Man was waving at them, his hair bleached nearly white, skin darkly tanned, dressed in black. He looked like Casanova. He looked like one of the bears.

She was excited. Adrenaline rushed through her, fear amplifying her desire, filling her with anticipation. She yearned for his predatory maleness, just as he yearned for something from the bears.

When they opened the plane doors, the odor of fish and bear scat slapped her in the face. The sexy, salty smell of the marshland filled her lungs and brought a dizzying, voluptuous feeling of surrender.

Whoever she had been, she was no longer. She was alive and she was here.

She ran into his arms, which clamped around her and held her tight. His pungent body odor seared into her brain, and made her pores open and sweat. She found his smell both alarming and reassuring.

This is the way it is. I mustn't be afraid.

8.

That first night she lay in the tent, eyes wide open, mortified, her heart racing, listening to the bears snorting beside the tent or shuffling past on the bear path, smelling them, feeling their heat, waiting for one of them to pause to sniff the tent, then rake its claw through the nylon. But no bear was curious about the humans that night, and the shuffling and snorting and plodding continued.

She could not relax. The air in the tent was warm, yet the cold seeped up from the ground as if it were still thawing after three months of summer.

In the middle of the night, the Bear Man sat up, listening. He got out of his bag and took her hand. Without saying a word, he led her

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out of the tent into the dark. The bright moon astonished her. The light was so stark, so glaring, that it hurt her eyes. As they walked, their figures moved like shadow puppets against a bright white sheet. The still lake was a white plain, and the leaves on the aspen, bellies up, glistened as if lit up with white Christmas lights.

A mound of fur slumbering fifteen feet from the tent raised its head as if to say, *Oh, it's you,* then lowered it, disinterested, wiggling its butt, returning to its bear dream.

He squeezed her hand hard, as if afraid of losing her in a crowd, and led her down the path. The deep impressions of bear feet, filled with water from the last rain, shined like a path of silver paving stones. Moist warm air rose from the grass, and a cool breeze flowed above. She was astonished at how much more information she seemed to pick up from her naked skin—the shifting air thermals, dank air from a fox den or crevasse, sweet air from the grasses or bear scat. Her sense of smell and hearing seemed heightened as well, as if her whole body was open to sensory reception.

It felt illegal somehow to be stumbling around in the night when they should be in their tent asleep. It felt foolish and dangerous, like running in a thunderstorm.

She felt the same excitement that she had sneaking off to a cemetery late at night as a child, under the full moon, stepping noiselessly around the tombstones that still radiated the day's heat and gleamed in the moonlight, the bare oaks scratching the black sky, and terror seeping into her mind like the moisture from the graves.

She trembled, yet she followed him. His naked skin glowed in the moonlight like a phantom, but his grip was hard. He didn't look back.

He led her down to the creek to a spot where a natural dam of rocks created a shallow pond. This is where they had swum with the bears that afternoon, when she felt the water rise on her chest as the overheated bears jumped into the water, frolicking like cubs, their bodies looking even larger as the water buoyed their thick coats. *Don't be afraid.* The bears ignored them, swimming past in a graceful dog-paddle with what appeared to be smiles on their faces.

He led her past the bushes where that afternoon she had crammed handfuls of salmonberries into her mouth alongside the bears, who delicately slipped branches of berries into their mouths, savoring them one by one. *Don't be afraid.*

Why did he go so close? She could sense when they were wary, backing up a little, veering away. As if he were testing just how close he could get. Going so far as to toss a salmon to an injured bear who sat by the creek, which broke all the rules.

He led her to a grassy knoll that looked out over the lakes and the mountains. Bears in furry mounds slept around the field. A pair of adolescent males shambled down a path toward the creek. The

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air was cooler up here. No doubt that was why the bears chose to sleep there.

He took her into his arms.

There they were. Man, woman, bear.

She loved the feel of his cool skin, all muscles and meat, ribs and hair. It felt so real, so dangerous. She loved the way it hurt, down on her hands and knees. She couldn't see his face. He could be a stranger. Or a bear.

He pulled her onto his lap, and she ran her hands up his back, feeling his muscles expand and contract under his skin. The moon glinted in his eyes. His expression frightened her, a leer of appetite, of violence. Something final. She gave in. Nothing mattered anymore. Only this now.

She thought of the women in myths and folktales who made love to monsters in the dark, to bears and werewolves, to enchanted men or gods in the form of beasts. Women seduced by the beast, who gave up everything for the beast.

And now she was one of them.

9.

"Get the camcorder," he says before unzipping the tent. "We might as well get a shot of him." Then he steps out into the rain.

She knows better than to question him, to second-guess him, knows that he will yell at her if she doesn't follow his instructions exactly. Without getting out of the sleeping bag, she scoots to the side of the tent. She digs beneath their jackets to find the video camera.

She almost laughs, hearing him yell at the bear, "Get out of here, you beast!"—his love of the bears ringing rich in his voice. She imagines him as a child, defending his mother's petunia bed from a neighbor's dog: "Go on, get!"—twirling his arms like a whirligig, and the astonished canine backing up and trotting off. She hears him whoop and holler, his joy unmistakable.

She pushes the audio switch on the camcorder, then freezes, listening. Why doesn't she hear the bear? What is it doing? Is it backing up? Is it staring at him? Are its ears back? Will it attack?

The bear roars.

Then a wallop and a ripping sound and the voice of a man screaming.

In astonishment?

10.

"Maybe we shouldn't pitch our tents so close to the bear path," she suggested carefully after summoning her courage, knowing she risked his anger.

"It'll be fine. They're used to me here."

She wanted to believe him, so she didn't remind him that these

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bears were different from the ones he knew, that these were hungry old boar bears, making one final sweep of the salmon grounds before heading into the mountains to their winter dens. These bears had the foul breath of carrion eaters, and she couldn't help but think about the story of the bears that slinked down into Yarrow Creek Canyon in the Alberta Rockies in the early nineteen hundreds, who fed on the corpses of Indians killed by smallpox. Bears that learned to like the taste of human flesh, who preyed on humans who hiked into that valley to this day, a hundred years later.

These were bears attracted by the smell of death. Whose mouths dripped with saliva at the smell of rotting flesh.

They were the undertakers of this half-world landscape.

This land of shades.

She wanted to believe her lover, to trust his knowledge and judgment, just as she trusted her father and desired all her life to trust the men she loved. *He will keep me safe. He knows better than I. I must have faith.*

In faith she returned with him to the Grizzly Maze. In faith she followed him up the bear path.

"Never trust a man," her aunt said. "Trust your instincts," her mother said. "Trust in God," her priest said. If you don't have faith, you are all alone, and what's the point of that?

So she followed him up the bear trail and she helped pitch the tents.

11.

The forest erupts in an ear-splitting rage-filled roar, as if the earth itself were sundered in two.

The bear's roar slams into her like an explosion in a tunnel, shooting daggers to her neck and ears, slugging her in the chest, chilling her blood, paralyzing her lungs. A sound that is a weapon.

She freezes, her right hand on the lens cap of the camcorder, her left hand poised above the handle, ready to lift it from its canvas carrying case. The audio light blinks on. Red.

Her mind becomes mush, her brain synapses frayed and useless. She sees black silhouettes rimmed with halos, her pupils pulsing as if blinded by light. The roar can't be real, a soundtrack piped in over a sound system, the shattering reverb a mistake, and a voice will pitch in, "Please excuse our technical difficulties." The roar is the earth erupting, torn asunder, a volcano, an earthquake, a tsunami. It cannot be the sound of a living creature.

The bear uses all of its air in its first wild and protracted roar, and, without seeming to take breath, roars again.

Her eyes throb. A metallic gold flashes over the black image of a bear, bear teeth, a scrambled jumpy picture of jagged stalagmites and a black cave. Still she cannot move.

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12.

"Come out here! I'm getting killed out here!"

She hears his clothes ripping, and something—his body?—being flung back and forth on the ground. He is screaming in pain, a screeching siren like she has heard only once before, when her father hit a deer with his truck, blood splattering over their windshield, the deer screaming until her father collected himself enough to grab his Remington from his gun rack and shoot it.

"I'm getting killed out here!"

This can't be happening! Not as they were just about to leave, not as her life was just about to begin for real. That's not how the story goes. The woman is rewarded for her bravery, for her sacrifice.

She can't move. Her body does not obey her commands, just as it failed to respond in similar situations of crisis, her mind fleeing her body in complete disbelief—*This can't be happening!*—and she is lost in a space without time, floating, powerless, paralyzed, even as shame floods over her for her inaction.

Did he yell, "Come out here" or "Don't come out here"? She feels a warm trickle of urine down her jeans, and, absurdly, worries about soaking her sleeping bag, recalling the miserable discomfort of trying to sleep in a wet bag. Yet she can't move.

"I'm getting eaten alive out here!"

"Play dead," she yells, and her words yank her back into her body. She scrambles out of her bag, her feet hitting the freezing ground, cold shooting up her spine. She spins, looking for a weapon, and, seeing only an iron skillet, nearly laughs as an absurd image pops into her mind, a cartoon of a bear smacked over the head by a skillet, pound signs and exclamation points blazoned across the sky. Even in the cartoon, the bear doesn't fall. She spins again and grabs a tripod, yanking down the legs and locking them, as if unsheathing a sword.

"It isn't working!" he screams. "Ahhhhhh . . ."

"Fight back!" she yells, and then hears a pop, and a crunch that could only be bones, and a squelch, something hard followed by something soft. The bear gnashing, tearing, ripping flesh.

She hears the wet thud of flesh hitting the ground.

The screams stop.

She hears the bear circling him, huffing angrily. Its long claws scrape and dig at the ground. It must be piling leaves and sticks on top of him, burying him, making a cache, saving him for later. Good. That means the bear thinks he is dead and maybe it will go away. But maybe that means he *is* dead. How could he not make a noise with the bear biting him? Is he unconscious?

She sees the bear in her mind, as if there were no tent between them, its muzzle lathered with blood and foam. She feels a scream building in her chest, rushing up her throat like a geyser, a live

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thing struggling to get out, and images of death—his and hers, blood, mutilated bodies, darkness—swirling in her brain, and the scream pushing, pushing up. *No!* She mustn't make a sound. The scream has to come or else she'll explode. *No!* She clamps her hands over her mouth and doubles over as if to vomit, shaking her head violently, locking her jaws against the scream.

Her temples throb, and the pressure in her nose feels like it will pop. Then the scream passes, leaving her throat raw. She pants for air, terrified now, trying not to listen, then listening so hard her ears hurt.

Is this how I'm going to die?

She knows the bear is listening, lifting its chin to taste the air. It knows she is there. It hears her breathe. It smells her.

She hears alder branches snapping, and the bear crashing down the hill.

She is shaking violently, gasping in big gulping breaths, tears leaking out of the corners of her eyes as if facing a bitter cold wind. Rain plinks against the side of the tent. She waits and listens.

Is it really gone? Is it watching? Does it want to kill me too?

She has to go out there. She has to unzip the tent. She must try to save him.

She pinches the zipper flange until her fingers ache, taking care to unzip the tent as quietly at she can.

I have to go out there.

She can barely hear the zipper. *The bear can't hear it, can it?* No, it couldn't, it wasn't possible, not with the wind. It seems to take forever. She unzips it to the very bottom to make sure she doesn't trip.

She pokes her head out of the tent. The sky is steel gray, the rain falling hard again, the sedge grass rippling in the wind. The smell of bear lingers in the air. She smells blood.

It is too dark to see much. She clutches the flashlight in one hand and the tripod in the other—her weapon in case the bear charges her. Will the flashlight attract it? Where can she run? She knows there are no trees nearby that she can climb, but she looks for one anyway, a maverick tree that she missed, silhouetted against the gray sky.

She sees no sign of her lover.

She steps out of the tent, staying crouched, listening for the bear. She clicks on the flashlight and cautiously moves the beam around the camp—to the edges of the tent and down the bear path. She sees a mound of leaves and dirt, and a dark smear on the ground which could only be blood.

She listens for the bear, for any sound from the mound of leaves. Nothing. Only the sound of rain.

Slowly she straightens, slightly more confident, and steps toward the bear's cache. She flashes the light on either side of the mound

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looking for the bear's tracks, so she will know what direction the bear ran, and from which direction it might come charging back. The light reflects on a staggered line of bear prints, quickly filling with water. The tracks lead to the creek.

She moves the light over the ground, which is torn up like a football field after a game in the rain, grass yanked out in clumps, slick patches of mud. Hanging from a thorny weed is something that looks like a large deflated balloon. As she steps closer, cupping her hand over the top of the flashlight to direct the beam, the balloon begins to look like a rubber Halloween mask folded in half. She gasps, realizing what it must be, nausea rushing up her esophagus. She vomits, and quickly wipes her mouth.

Got to help him. Got to get him out of the rain. Got to find the satellite phone. Got to call for help. But she knows no pilot will fly in this weather. Not until it clears.

She steps carefully toward the cache. Chunks of flesh and bits of clothing litter the ground. She circles to the other side where she sees some of a flannel shirt exposed. Slowly she moves the beam of light up the mound.

A bloody arm sticks out from under a sprinkling of leaves, a hand twisted at an odd angle. She lifts a branch. A red pulpy mess of a skull leers at her, its upper jaw exposed, fleshless, a hole where there should be a nose. Lidless eyeballs stare out at her.

She drops the flashlight and screams.

She thinks she hears the thunder of a distant earthquake, then feels a tickle on the soles of her feet, the rippling of the earth's crust, followed by violent crashing noises. The ground jumps and shakes as if trying to topple her to her knees.

13.

The tape rolls on, audio only, the camcorder lens cap tightly screwed on.

The tape rolls on, a tape that will confound the National Park Service employees, who will execute the bear as if it were a murderer. And the medical examiner, who will analyze the bear's stomach. And the documentary filmmaker. And whoever else is brave enough to listen.

Six minutes that seem like six hours.

Six minutes that paint in the mind a scene of dark horror. Whatever your mind can imagine.

"Come out here, I'm being killed out here!"

"Play dead!"

"It isn't working!"

"Fight back!"

The tape records the wind and the rain, the zipper, the roar of the grizzly, and their screams.

And then the tape runs out. ●

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The Problem of the Summer Snowman

by Edward D. Hoch

EQMM has received an unusual number of Dr. Sam Hawthorne stories lately, and that's because his creator, Edward D. Hoch, is readying another Dr. Sam short-story collection. Hawthorne is your editor's favorite of all the many fine characters the Rochester author has conceived. Why not write and let us know which characters you like best!

Our new daughter Samantha was only seven weeks old (Dr. Sam Hawthorne was telling his visitor) when Northmont was hit with one of the most baffling murders I'd ever been called upon to solve. And in a way it was never solved. If you'll let me pour you a small libation, I'd be happy to tell you about it.

It was late August of 1944 and the war was going well on all fronts. Allied troops were on the outskirts of Paris, with the city expected to fall within days. Some of our local boys were even coming home on leave and I'd seen them around town. Annabel was back to work at the Ark, taking our daughter with her each day in a wicker basket. I couldn't imagine how she'd grow up after spending her early days in a veterinary hospital, but I knew with Annabel as her mother nothing dangerous would occur. We were already looking for someone to take care of her when she reached the toddler stage.

It was Annabel who mentioned Scott Grossman to me one night over dinner. With most young men off in the military, he was one of our town's few eligible bachelors. "We should find a nice young woman for him," she decided one evening after he'd brought his cat in for some minor ailment.

"What's the matter with him? How did he avoid the draft?"

"Some medical condition, I suppose. You don't ask questions like that, Sam. Any number of things might keep him out of the army, all the way from a punctured eardrum to homosexuality."

"If it's the latter, he doesn't need a nice young woman," I pointed out.

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"Sam!"

Grossman was in his late thirties and lived alone with his cat, though he had a married brother and sister, both with families. He wasn't one of my patients, but in a town the size of Northmont we all pretty well knew each other. "What makes you so interested in him all of a sudden?" I asked her.

"I don't know, he just seems like a nice guy. He told me he's planning a birthday party for his eight-year-old nephew on Saturday. Another nephew is home on leave from the navy."

"He'll be going back," I predicted. "The war's not over yet."

"They say once Paris falls, the German army will fall apart."

"I doubt that. They'll protect the fatherland at all costs."

I thought no more about Grossman until Saturday, when the radio news reported that Paris had fallen and American troops were marching up the Champs-Élysées. It was a great day, made even finer by a late-summer warmth that covered the area. I was relaxing on the porch while Annabel fed our daughter, and I thought nothing of it when Sheriff Lens pulled up in front in his patrol car.

"Enjoying the weather?" I called out to him.

"I was until a half-hour ago. Something's happened out at Scott Grossman's house, and I may need you if you're free."

"What is it, a medical problem?"

"Don't know. Some family members arrived for a birthday party and the house is locked up. They think they see someone on the floor through the kitchen curtains."

I told Annabel I was going with the sheriff, which prompted her to reply, "Please, no more locked rooms!"

We arrived at Grossman's small house on Dakota Street about ten minutes later to find a group of people standing out in front, all arrivals for the birthday party. Eight-year-old Todd was the star, restlessly waiting for the party to begin. His older brother Mitch, on leave from the navy but wearing civilian clothes, was trying to keep the birthday boy in tow. Young Todd's parents, Hugh and Vicky Grossman, looked increasingly concerned, and Grossman's sister Ethel was positively frantic. As I stepped from the sheriff's car she came running up to me, dragging along a small girl with blond curls who couldn't have been more than five years old.

"Dr. Sam, this is Amy Feathers. She lives two doors away in that green house. Tell the doctor what you saw, Amy."

The little girl looked up at me with wide blue eyes. "I saw a snowman," she said, "just for a second. He went into Mr. Grossman's house."

We broke the glass in the kitchen door and Mitch Grossman reached in to unlock the bolt. When we entered we found Scott's body on the kitchen floor, just inside the doorway to the living room. "Looks like a wound to the heart," I said. "Too big for a

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bullet. Probably a knife."

The children were kept outside in the care of Vicky Grossman while Sheriff Lens and I investigated. "Front and back doors both locked and bolted from the inside," the sheriff told me. "One side window open for some fresh air, but the screen is securely latched from the inside. No one went out that way."

"The neighbor girl says she saw a snowman go in."

"Sure, in August!"

"You may not like it, but she's our only witness."

"She might as well have said Santa Claus killed him. Any chance he lived long enough to bolt the door after his assailant left?"

I shook my head. "He was probably killed instantly. The autopsy should show a wound directly to the heart. Any sign of the weapon?"

Sheriff Lens shook his head. "Killer must have taken it with him."

I walked around the small living room, noting a few paperback western novels and an inexpensive chess set. A 12-inch world globe shared an end table with a crystal lamp that looked like an antique. I tried to think of what was missing, and then it came to me. "Where's the cat?" I asked.

"What?"

"Scott's cat. Annabel just treated it for an infection or something."

We searched around without luck, and finally I went upstairs to the tiny bedroom under the rafters. "Here she is," I called out as I opened the door and the cat came running to greet me. "I'm surprised he kept it up here." I bent to pet her a bit and then closed the door. It wouldn't do to have her down by the body. While I was upstairs I checked a small storage area, but there was no place big enough to hide even a midget. There was no sofa or fold-out bed that might have concealed the killer, and the house had no basement.

Sheriff Lens had noticed something on the living room carpet and was on his knees when I went back downstairs. "Look here, Doc. This big portion of the carpet is soaking wet. What do you make of that?"

I hated to say it, but I had no choice. "It's where the snowman melted, Sheriff. And probably the weapon too, if it was an icicle."

The family had gone home to celebrate Todd's birthday at his own house. "We can't let his uncle's death ruin his birthday," Vicky Grossman said, seemingly unmoved by her brother-in-law's murder. I promised to come over later, if only to cheer them up on this bleak day, but first I wanted to speak with the parents of little Amy Feathers. Her mother, Jeanette, was at home, and she let me in at once, wondering just what had happened two doors away.

"I'm afraid your neighbor has been killed," I told her.

She was a large woman, tending to overweight, and I hoped her daughter wouldn't grow up the same way. "Mr. Grossman? That's what Amy said, but I couldn't believe it."

I glanced through the parlor at the little girl playing with one of

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her dolls. "Does she often make up stories, Mrs. Feathers?"

"Amy? Not really. Sometimes when she's playing with her dolls she invents a little tale, like most girls her age, but she never lies to me."

"She said she saw a snowman going into the Grossman house."

"I know. I've tried to reason with her about that, telling her snowmen don't come out in the summer, but she insists that's what she saw."

"Could we take her out in the yard for a moment so she can show me where she was standing?"

"Certainly." She called her daughter, who came running, ready for a new adventure. Outside, she pointed across the adjoining yard toward Scott Grossman's house. "I was right here when I saw the snowman."

"There's a hedge in-between," I said. "You couldn't have seen his feet."

"No, but I saw the rest of him, especially his head."

"Could you draw us a picture of what you saw?"

"Sure," she agreed, eager to oblige. We went back in the house and she quickly drew a figure in white passing behind the hedge, with a big round head that could only have belonged to a snowman.

"Did he have eyes and a nose?" I asked.

She thought about that. "I didn't see any."

"Thank you, Amy. You've been a big help. And you too, Mrs. Feathers."

When we were out of Amy's earshot she asked quietly, "Was it a robbery?"

"At this point we don't know what it was. Did you happen to see anyone leaving his house?"

"No, but I wasn't looking that way. Out back I saw one of the high-school boys was running in his shorts and undershirt, and the woman down the street was walking her beagle. The local rubbish men were doing their usual Saturday pickup, and I pretty much keep my eye on Amy when she's in the yard alone."

"So you didn't happen to see a snowman."

She smiled. "I think you have to be a five-year-old to see one in this heat."

I left them and drove over to Hugh Grossman's house. He was on the phone, notifying friends and family of Scott's death. In the living room, his wife Vicky was doing her best to ensure that young Todd's birthday party wouldn't be completely ruined. Grossman's sister Ethel had been joined by her husband Pete Norris, a truck driver who'd parked his rig in front of the house.

"Has Sheriff Lens been here?" I asked Vicky.

"Not yet. He said he was coming as soon as they finished at the crime scene." The fact of Scott's death was finally getting through to her and I could see she was close to tears.

When I noticed Hugh was off the phone I went to speak with him. "Any idea who could have done this to your brother?"

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"None at all. Most everyone in town liked Scott."

"Did he always keep his house locked up like that?"

"Not in this hot weather. Whoever killed him must have been afraid of being interrupted."

"Everyone has enemies, Hugh. Your brother must have had some too."

"Not outside the family."

I perked up. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Before he could answer, Sheriff Lens arrived with one of his deputies. Vicky hurried to intercept him, lest he dampen the celebration. Todd was busy playing a new game with his brother and seemed to take no notice of the sheriff.

"Am I in time for the birthday cake?" the sheriff asked Hugh.

Grossman smiled. "We'll always have a piece for you. Any news?"

"Nothing. The doorknobs and other likely surfaces were all wiped clean of prints."

Ethel Norris came over to join us. She was a slender woman who looked a bit like her brothers. "I don't know what you've been hearing, Sheriff, but I want you to know my husband wasn't even in town when Scott would have been killed. He just pulled in with his truck about a half-hour ago."

I remembered Hugh's remark of a moment earlier. "Was there trouble between them?"

She tossed her head as if dismissing my question, but then decided to answer it. "Pete's a truck driver. He's got a bum leg that kept him out of the service. Scott was always riding him about it, even though he'd never been in the army himself. It was such a little thing, but somehow it grew into a big thing."

"Not big enough for murder, surely."

"Of course not! I just wanted the sheriff to know."

She walked away and was immediately replaced by Vicky Grossman. "It's my son's eighth birthday, Sheriff, and it's been a bad day for everyone. Can't you save the questions till tomorrow?"

"All right," he agreed.

I followed him outside and we sat in his car for a while, talking about the case. "Any ideas?" I asked.

"Not a one. A snowman, or someone dressed as a snowman, entered Scott Grossman's house and stabbed him, then just melted away, leaving both doors bolted from the inside and a window screen latched from inside."

"Maybe the snowman didn't kill him," I suggested. "Maybe the snowman was Grossman himself."

"A suicide?"

"Well . . . then we'd have to explain the missing weapon. And what happened to the snowman costume? And why didn't anyone but that little girl notice a snowman?"

"You always make everything so difficult, Doc."

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I merely smiled. "Guess I'll head home and see how Samantha's doing."

"That's a wonderful name. It makes me smile when I say it."

"Me too."

In the morning Annabel insisted we go to church. I'd never been a regular Sunday churchgoer, but since our marriage I've gone with her more frequently. "We have to think about the baptism," she said. "And godparents."

"I'd want my nurse April as godmother," I decided. "I'm godfather to her son, whom she named after me."

"Fine. How about Max for godfather?" Max Fortesque was our favorite restaurateur, owner of Max's Steak House, where we'd held our wedding reception.

I smiled. "That was quickly settled. If the minister's around maybe we can set the date."

"What about Scott Grossman's murder? Any leads?"

"Sure. It was supposed to be his nephew Todd's eighth birthday party. A neighbor girl thought she saw a snowman entering the house. Of course she didn't, but what did she see? Someone in a snowman costume that no one else noticed? And how'd the killer get out of the house?" I ran over what few details we knew.

"No one else was there?"

"No one except the cat in an upstairs bedroom. I don't know why Scott put her up there."

"I can answer that," Annabel said. "You said he was having a party for young Todd. Scott mentioned once that Todd's allergic to cats. It's something that runs in that branch of the family."

"Do you know anything about Ethel's husband, the truck driver?"

"Pete Norris? I've never really met him, but I see him around. Sort of a loudmouth at times. I heard he and Scott had a skirmish at a family picnic last month."

"Anyone else who might have had reason to kill Scott?"

"No. Far as I know he didn't have any girlfriends who could feel jealous or jilted. If he did, he certainly kept it quiet."

After the service we spoke to Reverend Charters about the baptism and arranged a date for it. As we were about to leave he asked me, "Are you helping Sheriff Lens with the Grossman killing?"

"We talked about it," I admitted. "Did you know Scott?"

"I know the whole family. I'll be doing the funeral service on Wednesday. Hugh and Vicky are parishioners, though I don't see them too often."

When we returned home I phoned the sheriff and learned that the autopsy was complete and Scott's body had been released to the funeral parlor. "It was a wide blade," he told me. "Most likely one of the kitchen knives, but we haven't found it yet. Went right to the heart. He'd been dead about two hours when we found him."

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"I'd better go over and see the family," I decided.

It was a glum gathering at Hugh and Vicky's house as they waited for the visiting hours that evening. Mitch was doing his best to keep the conversation going with stories about the war in the Pacific. Young Todd was all ears, asking him about the naval battles he'd seen. Mitch was a handsome lad, looking as if he should still be in school rather than fighting a war half a world away. "In June I was on an escort carrier off Saipan," he told us. "When my leave is over I have to go back to San Diego for a new assignment."

Too old for the draft, and never having served in the military, it was difficult for me to imagine what it must be like. The constant stress of warfare, with enemy planes and submarines on the prowl, would have to be unnerving even on shipboard where one was never face to face with the enemy.

"I hope the war is still on when I'm old enough to fight," Todd told them after listening to his brother's adventures.

I prayed he'd never know what war was really like.

Annabel and I went to the funeral parlor that evening. In those days it was common for the deceased to be laid out for viewing two or three days before the funeral. On our way out, Vicky who spoke to my wife about the dead man's cat. "Her name is just Meow," she said. "Do you know a family that might like her? We'd take her ourselves, but with the boys' allergies—"

Annabel glanced at me. "We could take her for a time, until I hear of a family that would like a cat. She's a beauty."

I feared this might be the beginning of a permanent relationship, especially when Samantha grew a bit older, but I readily agreed.

"We'll be glad to take her. Where is she now?"

Vicky called to her sister-in-law. "Ethel, you have Meow, don't you?"

Ethel Norris joined us. "Sure. Have you found a home for her?"

"Dr. Sam and Annabel will take her for now."

"That's great. She's at our house. We'll be out of here at nine and you can come pick her up then if you'd like."

It was only twenty-five minutes, so we decided to wait. The Reverend Charters came by to lead a few prayers, and just before nine Jeanette Feathers slipped in. "Amy's home with her father," she told us, "but I thought I should pay my respects. Scott was a good neighbor."

"Did he ever have Amy over to his house?"

"Oh no, I don't allow her to go in neighbors' houses unless I'm along. But he was always pleasant when he saw her playing in our yard."

Todd had been spared the rigors of the funeral home, but his brother Mitch was there in his blue uniform, helping to greet the mourners. "When do you go back?" I asked him.

"After the funeral. The escort carrier I've been assigned to will be sailing from San Diego next week." He grinned. "But I probably

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shouldn't be telling you that. Military secret."

"It's safe with me," I assured him.

His father, Hugh, came over to join us. "Doesn't he look great in his uniform? His mother and I are so proud of him. It's too bad this terrible tragedy had to spoil his leave time."

"Any idea what might have happened to your brother?" I asked Hugh.

"I suppose it was a robbery. He didn't have an enemy in the world."

"The doors were all locked from the inside, and the window screen was fastened from inside, too. He may have let the killer in, but there was no way for him to get out." I thought it best not to mention the snowman at this point.

"I hate to suggest it, but might he have committed suicide?"

"Had he ever hinted at it?"

"No, but sometimes he was depressed."

"What does your sister think?"

He snorted. "Ethel is just anxious to tell everyone that Pete was out of town when it happened."

"We're going over there now to pick up Scott's cat. Annabel and I will take care of it till we find it a proper home."

"That's good of you. Meow was Scott's only companion."

We followed Ethel and Pete from the funeral parlor to their modest home on the north side of town. "The rest of the family is coming over for a short while too," she told us. "Vicky just has to pick up Todd at a neighbor's house."

When the family was assembled and Annabel was renewing her acquaintence with Meow, I went over to talk with young Todd.

"How was your birthday party?" I asked casually.

"Good, I guess. But I was sad for Uncle Scott."

"Did you see him often?"

"Sure. Sometimes he took care of me when Mom and Dad went out somewhere."

"Did you like him?"

He nodded. "We played games together."

"Did you get lots of good gifts for your birthday?"

"Mom and Dad gave me a bike, and Aunt Ethel and Uncle Pete gave me an Erector Set."

"Do you like to build snowmen in the winter?"

He grinned. "Sure, when there's enough snow."

"Did you ever see a snowman in the summertime?" I asked.

"Of course not! They'd melt!"

"Do you know that little girl, Amy, who lives near your uncle Scott?

"I don't have much to do with girls," he told me. "I see her playing sometimes when I'm over there."

Annabel and I left a short time later with Meow. "She's a cute little thing," my wife said, holding the cat up for a closer look. "But maybe we'll come up with a better name for her."

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On Monday, our good weather gave way to an overcast day with a threat of rain. I'd awakened that morning with an idea about the snowman murder, as I thought of it, and all through breakfast the idea gnawed at me. I phoned the office and told April I might be a bit late coming in.

Annabel and little Samantha had already left for the Ark when I drove over to Dakota Street once more. This time I wasn't interested in Scott Grossman's house so much as the contents of the backyard rubbish cans belonging to his neighbors. I'd checked a half-dozen of the closest ones when Jeanette Feathers appeared on the scene.

"Oh, it's you, Dr. Hawthorne. I saw someone looking through the rubbish and wondered what was going on."

"Pardon me, Jeanette. I should have asked you first. But the rubbish cans all seem to be empty."

"Sure. They pick it up here on Saturday afternoons."

"Of course. I should have remembered that."

"Want to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"Afraid I'm too busy for that today, but thanks for the invitation."

I headed out to the town dump, knowing it was a hopeless task. My Buick was beginning to sputter a bit and I only hoped it would last through another year. As a physician I had a high priority for a new car when one was available, but I hated to take one away from someone with an even greater need.

At the dump I asked the workers where I might find Saturday's rubbish. "You lose something?" one of them asked. "Hard to find anything in this mess."

"It would be a flat parcel, not too large, wrapped in white paper."

"What part of town did it come from?"

"Around Dakota Street."

"Saturday, you say?"

"That's right."

He led me over to the right side of the dump. "It would probably be somewhere in here. Nothing got picked up yesterday so it should be near the top."

I pawed through the mess for about fifteen minutes, pretty much convinced that I wouldn't find a thing. Then I spotted a bit of white paper such as butchers might use to wrap meat. I held my breath and tugged at it.

"Find what you're looking for?" the workman asked as I carefully unwrapped the paper.

"Yes," I said, barely able to speak. "This is it. Thanks for your help."

Late that afternoon, Sheriff Lens and I paid another visit to the funeral parlor. A restful smoking room was provided downstairs for family members and friends to take a breather from the upstairs commotion, and it was here that we found Mitch Grossman in his

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navy uniform. His face was buried in his hands, and I knew at once that this most baffling of mysteries had reached its conclusion.

"Do you want to tell us about it, Mitch?" I asked quietly, sitting down beside him.

"What, Doc?"

I opened my medical bag and took out the parcel wrapped in white paper. "We have this," I said. "Do you want to tell us what happened?"

He was aghast at the sight of it, throwing up his hands as if to ward off some unspeakable horror. "How could you have that? How?"

"I dug around at the town dump until I found it." I unfolded the white paper and showed him the white summer uniform he'd been wearing on Saturday. Across the front was a telltale splatter of dried blood. "Why did you kill your uncle, Mitch?"

"God help me, I had no other choice."

"Tell us about it," Sheriff Lens urged.

"From the time I was eleven or twelve, he'd been—I don't know, putting his hands on me, things like that. He wanted me to do things."

"Did you tell your parents?" the sheriff asked.

"How could I? He was my father's brother. They'd have said I was imagining it."

"What happened Saturday?"

"He was having the birthday party for Todd and he suggested I come by early, before the party, so we could chat. I should have known what he wanted, but I'd been away. I thought he was over that. I arrived with my birthday gift for Todd, and he started in again, like I'd never been away. I told him to stop it. We were standing in the kitchen doorway and he said something about Todd, how in a few more years Todd would be old enough. I—I just went crazy. I grabbed up one of the kitchen knives and drove it into his chest."

That was all. He started sobbing and I knew the rest of the story would be up to me. "Tell us how you knew, Doc," the sheriff said.

"There were two things, the killer's entrance and his exit. The entrance, apparently, was observed by five-year-old Amy Feathers down the street. She had only an instant's glimpse, but she thought she saw a snowman. She even drew us a picture of his big round head. Of course it was no snowman in August. so I asked myself what it might have been. Could one of the birthday guests have arrived early with a gift? There were no white spheres in evidence in Scott's house, but there was a twelve-inch globe, positioned rather awkwardly on an end table with an antique lamp. It seemed the perfect gift to an eight-year-old boy from his brother in the navy far away."

"You mean Mitch arrived with the globe on his head?

"On his shoulder, actually. Right, Mitch? It was large enough to block out your head when seen from the side, wrapped in white paper. Little Amy's quick glimpse saw a figure in white with a globular white head. A snowman, of course, to someone with her limited experience."

"But why did he unwrap the birthday gift?" Sheriff Lens wanted

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to know. "He didn't need that globe for anything."

"He didn't need the globe, but he needed the paper." I gestured toward the parcel in front of me. "Scott's blood splattered on his white uniform, and he couldn't leave the house wearing it. In those moments after the killing he was still hoping to cover up the crime and hide the body."

"What about the large area of wet carpet?"

I smiled slightly. "Where you thought the snowman melted? He was merely washing the blood from the carpet. Maybe he had some crazy idea of getting the body out of there before it was found. That was impossible, of course. He dragged the body into the kitchen, washed off the knife, washed the blood from the carpet, and took off his uniform."

"What? Are you telling me he left the house naked?"

"Of course not. He wrapped the bloody uniform in that white paper and ran out the back door, depositing it in one of the rubbish cans waiting to be emptied. Then he simply kept running home in his shorts and undershirt. With his boyish face, at least one neighbor mistook him for a high-school boy, perhaps practicing for the track team."

"That back door was bolted from the inside," Sheriff Lens reminded me.

"Not when he left, it wasn't. You're forgetting it was Mitch who reached through the broken glass in the door, supposedly to unbolt it. He covered the fact that it was unbolted all along, and provided us with a seemingly impossible murder. He was the only one who could have faked it, and once I realized that the rest of it started falling in place. Another element was the cat. Why did Scott have to lock it away two hours or more before young Todd would arrive? Because his brother Mitch was allergic too, and he was arriving earlier."

Sheriff Lens took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Mitch, but I'm going to have to arrest you."

I saw the anguish in his face, an anguish the sheriff and I both felt too. "Couldn't it have been suicide after all, Sheriff?" I asked. "Will this make it any easier on the family if his motive comes out?"

"What about the weapon?"

"We found it under the stove."

"But I searched—" Then he stopped and peered at the young man, still so close to being a boy. "When did you say you were due back?"

"I'm supposed to leave right after the funeral on Wednesday."

Sheriff Lens glanced in my direction. "You're getting a second chance, son," he told Mitch Grossman. "Make good use of it."

To the people of Northmont, the death of Scott Grossman became a suicide. But the ways of the gods are strange at times. Two months later, on October 26th, Mitch Grossman was killed in action when one of the first Kamikaze suicide flights hit his escort carrier in the sea off the Philippines. ●

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The Steaming Gun

by Ron Carlson

It was midnight and my fabulous partner Phil Garrity and I were out on River Road looking at an upside-down Lexus when the College Hill call came in. The Lexus had skidded on what everybody calls The Dip and busted through the old wooden guardrail and was wrong way up on the grassy bank. The headlights were still on, and the radio was playing pretty hard hip-hop, and so it wasn't until Phil stepped down through the icy splinters that we understood the car was still running. Garrity went around to the open passenger door and looked inside and said to me, "Nobody home."

Ron Carlson makes his first appearance in *EQMM* this month, but he is by no means new to short-story writing. An O. Henry Prize winner, his work has appeared in *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and *The New Yorker*. Two of his story collections, *At the Jim Bridger* and *The Hotel Eden*, were selected for the *New York Times* notable books list and noted among the *Los Angeles Times* Best Books of the Year. His most recent book is the YA novel *The Speed of Light*.

"This car thief survived and ran away," I told him. "Smile." The flash from my camera lit the whole scene. The undercarriage of the car made a beautiful puzzle.

"Take another," he said. He stood up and straightened his tie and patted the corners of his lustrous head. "Cheese," he said and I took another shot. Garrity is a little proud of his hair.

I pointed. "He came up here and jogged toward town."

"What makes you think he didn't freak out and jump in the river?"

"He's stupid, not suicidal." It was late October and there was a fringe of ice along the bank, frosting the reeds. The cold snap had surprised everybody. As a cop you want a story to go with the scene, but sometimes you just get the scene. The first thing you do on your first call as a rookie is speculate about what happened, and speculation is your partner evermore. It's the way, even with the jaded guys like me. You can't stop it, so instead you look for

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footprints, which is what I found there on the shoulder. The perpetrator left quite a scramble of shoe prints in the gravel there. I dropped my old pocket ruler on the ground for scale and took a picture of the prints. Across the street I found some more. He had about a four-foot stride and he ran heavily on his heels in pants with big open pockets because down a few yards, like a shiny penny, I found his cell phone. I put it in my pocket.

Two police cruisers arrived, and I told the first guy, a sergeant named Whisner, "Call a tow truck and search the area. You'll probably find this guy's wallet. He's an idiot." See, I was still speculating.

"Did you know the Lexus can run upside down?" Garrity asked me. His words were all steam in the frigid night. "They should put it in their advertising."

"Come on, Phil," I told him. "We got a call; there's a couple bodies waiting for us on College Hill."

On the way back to town, I asked my fabulous partner, "How fast was he going?"

"Sixty-five, sixty-eight. He skidded ninety feet. Faster than that and he would have gone swimming for sure."

"You're good, Phil."

"Thank you, Benny. It's all part of my CSI approach to the crime scene."

"So then, did you take DNA from the steering wheel where his teeth hit?"

"Go back, Benny. Right now." He was kidding. We always kidded about the forensic craze. You had to joke just to survive it. It was bad at first with all of our friends asking did we do the chemical analysis of this and that. Did we check out the microbes on this and that. Did we match the DNA on this and that. For a while we said, no, we just look for the guy with the gun in his hand and jump on him and take him and all his DNA to jail. We actually had to do that one time in Horatio's Fishhouse. We chased a guy who'd robbed the bank next-door and cornered him in the kitchen. When he pulled his gun from his jacket, my fabulous partner Phil Garrity tackled him hard right there and the gun flew into the lobster pot. When backup arrived, they cuffed the bad guy and asked for the gun. Horatio himself fished it out of the broth with some tongs, and it was perfect: a greasy .38 steaming like a clam in the bright room. Clear evidence: the steaming gun.

But now the Crime Scene Investigation Unit was no joke. These two college kids come in, Madison Ellis and Kevin Monroe, and they've got all the funding. We're still driving a Ford without decent cupholders, and these two experts have got two offices and a new laboratory, plus a town car with leather seats. Phil Garrity and I try to avoid them every chance we get. They call us the

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"masters of the obvious," which frankly, I take as a compliment. Nobody wants to hear about a good fingerprint or a spent shell anymore; it's got to be chemistry or nothing at all. They're not happy until they haul out the microscope.

College Hill is the student section of the city; all the great homes of yesteryear have been carved up into apartments for the university students. The streets rise up the hill, all named after presidents, and it's the only part of this old town that still gets to me. A thousand years ago, I lived here before I dropped out of State and went to the police academy. Actually, I lived with Patricia Adams, who was also a history major, and who happened to be the love of my life, and who was killed at the intersection of Van Buren and Twelfth the first Saturday of our senior year. Two frat guys full of beer hit her bicycle and that was that. No speculation. That is as much of a story as there would ever be. And, as a crime scene, it wasn't much, but I cannot get her mangled bicycle out of my head.

We're going up to Cleveland and Fifteenth, and as we turn into the district, I tell Garrity to go around.

"Come on, Benny, let's get up there. We could be first."

"Go around. You know to go around."

My fabulous partner Phil Garrity, who was my roommate at the academy, and who has been driving us around for eleven years, turns on Taft so we can avoid Van Buren and Twelfth. He's always telling me to get over it, and I tell him right back that this is my way of getting over it; we go around. It's all I've got: my history. I don't need to see where that bicycle ended up on the sidewalk again and again. We went to the post-stress seminar last year, and Phil came out saying that I needed closure. He tries. I told him: Every time I get near that intersection my throat closes up and I have trouble breathing. That's all the closure I need.

We were the first to arrive anyway, which was good news. It was an old Georgian place, with two ruined columns in front and the landlord sitting on the steps in the dark. We could see his breath. We got out of the car and Garrity called to the guy, "You got a gun?" It's not a joke. We always start this way because it was extremely useful on two separate occasions. Never overlook the obvious.

He was a young guy. All the landlords now are young guys; it was all geezers in my time. These must be their sons. He was in jeans and a well-worn white button-down shirt and an arctic vest, and he looked tired. He held up a key ring and Garrity took it.

"They're in the carriage house. She's been renting from me since last fall. The mother called me, and when I got home from work, I went back, about two."

"Where do you bartend?" I asked him.

"The Twilight," he said.

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I lead Garrity around the house and there is the little back house, like a cottage in a story.

"How'd you know he was a bartender?"

"Time of day," I said. "Plus, couldn't you smell the cigarettes on him?"

We didn't need the keys. We went into the cute little place and stood still inside the door for a minute in the dark, listening. Nothing. When it's bodies, we don't hurry.

It was chilly. Garrity turned on the lamp and we looked at the sitting room—the couch, the rocker, a spray of magazines on the milkbox coffee table. She had a couple of French museum posters on the wall, framed in plastic. "You have a fireplace when you were in college?" Garrity asked me.

"No time for a fire," I said. I was in the little alcove that served as a kitchen. There was a saucepan in the sink and two bowls and spoons. The garbage was old lettuce, four copies of the student newspaper *The Avalanche,* and a jumbo can of oyster stew. I checked the little fridge and it was clean and squared away: milk, eggs, butter, a bag of black grapes, some kind of fancy chocolate candy. "Uh-oh," I said.

"What you got?"

"No beer."

"That's crazy," he said. "You ready?"

"Right. Not much here. Let's take a look before the experts get here."

The two kids were on the bedroom floor, facedown. They both wore jeans and flannel shirts and the girl was partially on the boy's back. It looked like they'd just laid down, but the fan of papers indicated they'd fallen forward from sitting on the bed. She had a nice silver ring on her business finger with hearts etched around it, and the word ART inked on the back of her left hand and the letters HUR on her right hand.

"Blood?"

"No blood, no gun," I said. "Just papers and pens."

"What do you make of her hands?"

"That's his name."

"What's his name?"

"Arthur. I'm betting this is Arthur."

Garrity picked the heavy textbook off the bed. "Chemistry," he said. He read the opened page, "Understanding the Krebs Cycle."

"Whatever that is," I said.

Now I saw the name JEN on the boy's left hand. There was nothing on his right.

"How long they been here?" I asked him.

"I don't know. It's been cold. Three days?"

"Three days. That's a problem, you sleuth. You've got to nail it down to hours, minutes. The CSI guys will know it to the second.

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Who died first?"

"Tell me the cause of death?" Garrity asked.

"Tell me who died first?"

"One of them. He did. He's on the bottom."

"CSI may argue with that. That's the same kind of guess that could get you nowhere."

"You think she died first and then he died and crawled under her?"

"It could happen. Forensics will tell us the whole story, I'm sure." We could see the blue light now pulsing outside the window. "They're here."

A minute later, we heard voices and the CSI team came in, fresh as a new day.

"You touch anything?" Madison Ellis said to us.

"No, ma'am," Garrity said. "Just this schoolbook. Chemistry."

We knew what she was going to say next and she said it. "Don't touch anything."

"You taking over?" I asked her partner, Kevin Monroe, a guy who dressed like he lived at the Gap. He was handsome as an actor, the guy who plays a conflicted doctor on the hospitial show. She was wearing a nifty leather jacket, black, over a gray wool skirt.

"You guys come from the opera?" Garrity asked. I'd told him not to bait them, but he was a better man than me.

Madison Ellis had already flipped her blond hair back twice and she was at her BlackBerry pretty furiously. Kevin had the wallets out and was spelling the names to her: Jennifer McKinley and Arthur Johnson. In less than a minute, she had the deceased Arthur Johnson's roommate on the phone. But she is one of the few citizens of the world who can speak so quietly into her cell phone that you can't hear. She did a little turn talking there, and I watched Garrity enjoy the pulse in her calves. She'd obviously done some running in college. When she snapped the phone closed, Kevin said, "Note the self-defacement." He pointed to the hands and took three quick pictures. "And these are all chemical notes," he added. He had the smallest camera in the world; it looked like a pocketknife.

"The roommate says they've been going steady for a year," Madison said. "Inseparable, evidently."

"Evidently," I said.

"Love nest?" Kevin said. I loved it when they started talking this way. They wanted a story, a sexy story if possible.

"You're thinking suicide?" Garrity said.

"Do you see a steaming gun?" Kevin asked. He smirked.

"I don't see anything," Garrity said. "I see a couple of confused kids, and then, of course, these bodies here."

"That's enough of that," Kevin said. Without a sense of humor he wouldn't last—or he'd become a politician.

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"Seriously, Madison," I said. "You're thinking a suicide pact?"

"Look at this," she said, indicating the bodies.

"They're probably good kids," I said. "Studying for the chemistry final."

"It's always 'good kids' with you," she said. "You need a reality check."

"When are finals?" Garrity asked.

I did the math. "Today's Tuesday. Wednesday is reading day and finals start Thursday."

"A university man," Madison said to me.

"I'm a cop," I said. "But I've got a memory."

I'd taken in the room. Her books were on the shelf above her desk and they were all sheafed with notes and all the notes were in her handwriting. She was a good student. She had two posters on the wall, one a blown-up photograph of herself and young Arthur standing at the beach, their smiles busting their faces, and one of the periodic table of the elements. Like all things that remind me of how little I know, it had a kind of beauty. Her closet doors were missing, but she'd draped a curtain over the entry and I checked. Nine pairs of sensible shoes, none of them new. The window in the room had Levolor blinds and the view, which was murky through a sheet of plastic over the window, showed the line of garbage cans in the lighted alley. I checked the lamps, both of them working perfectly.

"Finals are coming," Kevin started his big theory, "it feels like the end of something. They're depressed . . ."

"Everyone's depressed," Garrity said.

Kevin went right on, like the great judge on the golden bench of logic. "They're under a lot of pressure and they decide to make their love ideal, perfect, forever, and they figure out a trace poison, one of the forty, and kiss goodbye." He wanted so badly to be in the papers.

"Cyanide will do," Madison said.

"Without a thought of their parents," I said. I remembered my girlfriend Patricia Adams's parents and how crushed they were. They blamed me, of course, because she'd moved in. If we hadn't been in love and she hadn't moved in, she wouldn't have been riding on Twelfth and crossed Van Buren and been killed by the drunks.

"Too much Romeo and Juliet for these kids," Kevin said. He had his chemistry case open and was swabbing here and there.

"Everybody's got too much Romeo and Juliet," Garrity said.

"You going to get the DNA?"

Kevin knew the tone and said, "You guys are through here."

"Kevin," I told him. "We never started. Let us know what you get. We'll run some police tape for you; when do you want the ambulance?"

"Twenty minutes," Madison said. "Thanks. And Ben, about your partner . . ."

"I know," I said. "Isn't he fabulous?"

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Outside I walked around the little cottage. It was a beautiful brick thing that at one time had held two big Lincolns, at least. They'd made the conversion nicely, matching the brick and putting in the fireplace so they could get a thousand dollars a month from some young scholar.

Garrity came up. "What are you doing? Taking a leak?"

In a blur through the window I could see Kevin taking his samples. "Those kids did not kill themselves," I said, and when I said that I felt that cell phone in my pocket vibrate and I held a hand up so Phil would be quiet.

I snapped it open and heard a gravelly voice say, "Dude, you okay?"

I put a knuckle in my teeth and grunted, "Uhh."

"Eberheart!" the voice said. "You okay?"

I bit down and mumbled, "Meet me."

"Where?"

"Polk's Tavern," I said. It wasn't a good choice, because tavern has two syllables, but I got it out.

"Good deal. Eberheart," the voice said, "are you drunk?" I snapped the phone shut and said to my noble partner, "Let's go downtown."

We got in the car and Garrity asked, "Shall we pick up a plain car and make the collar?"

I didn't want to make the collar. It would be sweet to meet the idiot who turned that car upside down by the river, but the two bodies had gotten to me. Something about the dead students was bothering me, and I knew part of it was their parents getting the news, and part of it was something CSI wasn't going to help with. "Go around," I told Garrity when he turned onto Van Buren.

"Come on, get over it. We could be drinking coffee in ten minutes," he said.

"Go around. There's no hurry." He turned onto Tenth and started the big circle toward headquarters.

At the station, I handed the cell phone to Sergeant Whisner and told him to go down to Congress Street and into the back bar of Polk's Tavern and call the last number on the phone's screen. "When it rings, arrest that guy and hold him until he gives up Eberheart. He's the car thief."

"That car was totaled," Whisner told me.

"It had a great radio," I told him. "Take Tyler with you and have him watch the front door."

Whisner grinned and took off. I was happy to hand it off to him; a favor like this would pay me back for the rest of the year. Besides, I couldn't get the kids out of my head. Garrity came back with coffee. "Let's call it a night," I told him.

"Is there DNA in coffee?" he said.

"Yes," I told him. "Even before you put your finger in it."

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The next morning, first thing, I went down to our holding cell and talked to young Tony Eberheart, the bruised car thief. He had a strip of white tape over his nose, and his wrist was bandaged. "You okay?" I asked him. "Were you wearing a seat belt?"

"Yeah, I was. Nothing's broken," he told me. "Who are you?"

"I just wanted to know how fast you were going. Did you hit some ice?"

"No," he told me. "I went in too fast. I forgot about that corner. I was doing seventy down the lane and I slowed to sixty-five, sixty-eight."

"You ever take a car before?"

"No, sir, I haven't."

"Be sure to tell them that in court," I said.

Upstairs, Arthur Johnson's parents were hurting. Jennifer McKinley's parents were hurting. I saw them sitting on the fancy furniture in the CSI waiting room, four nice folks who looked blasted. I could see Kevin and Madison in there laying out the story. Kevin had that look on his face that said everything he was saying was written in the big book in stone. Confidence is great, but that guy bothered me. All he needed was PowerPoint and a laser pen, which, rumor had it, he had ordered. It isn't necessary to admire all your colleagues.

My fabulous partner Phil Garrity was already into the paperwork, which was going to take us all morning. He had blown up the car photos to eight by ten and chosen the one where his tie was straight and he was smiling like a pirate. "Did you talk to them?" he asked me.

"No, I did not," I said. "But I'm going to."

I waited until the CSI team was finished and then I motioned to Madison. I wanted to ask a stupid question and I did. "How'd they take it?"

"Tough. They don't believe their kids would do such a thing."

"But you've got proof."

"We will by this afternoon," she said. "I need to see the slides."

I knew she meant the tissue samples. They'd have wafers under the microscope all day long. It was something to imagine.

"Listen," I said. "Madison. You like theories, right?"

"I'm a scientist, Ben," she said. "You can look at me. You don't have to look at your shoes. That trick doesn't work anymore. I'm listening. What have you got?"

A guy hates to have his tricks caught out, but I got over it and went ahead. "I used to live on College Hill, and I have a theory, and I wonder if it would be okay if we went up to the place with the parents."

"The scene of the crime?" she said, shaking her head. "You gumshoes."

"Just an hour," I said. "My theory."

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She leveled a look at me and lifted her BlackBerry.

I sent Phil Garrity ahead to open the place up and to start a fire, so the place would be warm enough for our visit. The CSI team, Madison and Kevin, drove the parents in a van, and I took our car. When I got to College Hill, I turned on Tenth and went way around to Harrison before turning up. Out of habit, I said aloud, "Go around." Sometimes the long way is the only sane way.

Before Garrity left, he had asked me, "Partner, do you want to share your game plan with me?"

"When I arrive, you go around to the alley and stand by the bedroom window. If you ever lose sight of me, come directly in and say hello."

"Hello?"

"Come in and say, 'Hello, how are you?' And Garrity?"

"Yeah?"

"You were right on with the speed of that Lexus."

At the alleged love nest, Jen's cottage, we greeted Garrity and crowded into the little place. With the fire going, it was heartbreakingly beautiful. The cozy room made you want to be a student. I wanted to be, anyway. But this time I'd study anthropology and spend my winters in Mexico digging up golden calendars from the ancient pyramids. I led everyone into the bedroom. It was tight in there but I pushed the door partway closed and stood by the window. The four bereaved parents sat on the bed, as uncomfortable as people get to be. It took awhile to sort everyone out and get settled. Jen's mother picked up a pair of her daughter's moccasins and started crying softly.

"I appreciate your coming out here," I told them.

"I just can't believe it," Arthur's father said. "This isn't something he would do. I know it."

"People are capable of many things," Kevin said. "We see some stuff." This was tough not to laugh at, some kid like Kevin acting world-weary after being on the force almost a year.

"They are," I said. "And though we've looked at this from every side, we may never know what happened in this room four days ago."

"Things were going so well for Jen," her mother said. "She was coming home for Thanksgiving."

"You never fought?" I asked.

"I've been over this," Kevin said.

"It's okay," Madison said. "Let him go." I could feel it warming in the room and she leaned against the wall.

"No," Jen's mother said. She looked at her husband. "We were like sisters." She looked at Arthur's mother. "She knew we liked Arthur."

"He had your approval?" I asked her.

"Always. We thought the world of that boy."

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"What were Arthur's plans?" I asked his father.

"He was an engineering major," the man said. I watched him rub his forehead as if struggling with a tight hat.

"I'm so tired," Arthur's mother said. "Can we go now? This has all been too much."

I looked at Kevin and saw what I was looking for. His eyes were at half-mast and he was having trouble hoisting up his arrogance. I hated to let him fall, but if I was going to make my point, he'd have to go down. I was just filling time, so I decided to tell the truth. "Mr. and Mrs. McKinley. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. You had great kids who would never have hurt you. They did not kill themselves. They died in an accident."

"What?" Mr. Johnson said. His wife had slumped against him now and he held her, alarmed.

Kevin, for the first time in his life, cooperated with my plans perfectly, and he folded and fell to the floor like a bag of upscale laundry. I stepped over him and crossed out through the sitting room and the smoldering fire and pulled open the front door. The air there was like a rush of tonic.

Phil Garrity came around and entered, saying to everyone, "Hello. How are you?"

Kevin was lying faceup and his eyes were open. Madison, kneeling over him, looked up at me and said, "Decent theory."

"What is it?" Mrs. McKinley asked. "What do you know?"

"The kids came here to study on the coldest night of the fall, I told her. "They started a fire and went in with their homework. This place is tight as a cigar box, and they didn't notice that the plastic liner of the window, which had been taped up for ventilation, had folded down." I pointed. "See, it has unfolded. The duct tape had failed and the plastic covered the window, which isn't a problem when there's no fire, but there's no air in this place. They went to sleep. They didn't feel a thing. I'm sorry for your loss." As a story, it wasn't sexy, but it had something going for it: It was true.

Mrs. Johnson was crying. "I knew it. I knew it." She was in her husband's arms.

Awhile later they loaded up the van. I saw Garrity go to Kevin and ask him if he was good to drive, and I'll give Kevin credit. He looked, for the first time, like he might hit somebody.

Madison came over to our car and spoke to me. "Thanks, Ben. Although you could have said it yesterday and we could have happily tested it then."

"I would have, but I didn't know it yesterday. I'm slow."

"Well, it's good work. I only resent that our safety valve was Garrity."

"Never question Garrity," I said.

"I know," she said, speaking loud enough for him to hear as he walked over. "For he is your fabulous partner." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

BALTIC BAIL-OUT

by Andrea C. Busch

Translated from the German by Mary Tannert

The breeze picked up. I could feel it on my skin. It filled the mainsail, then the jib; the ropes creaked and the yacht began to move. Finally! I looked at the skipper, a silent plea on my face, and he nodded. Gratefully, I bent over and shut off the diesel engine and its noise died away.

I leaned back, tilted my head backward, eyes closed, and let the wind blow across my face. The yacht carved through the water with a quiet gurgle, and the winch clicked quietly as the skipper tightened the jib. We picked up speed.

"Back then, in November, when we had storm training out'n the North Sea, y'know," said Heinz-Günther, tearing me from my reverie. "Those were big waves, lemme tell ya, real big waves. Well, let's just say you never seen waves like that!"

Robert, the man with whom I had been planning to enjoy this vacation, nodded in understanding, then got up, left the cockpit, and went in search of solitude on the foredeck. Now, I wasn't particularly romantically inclined, even if I did earn my living with the assembly-line production of romance novels, but even so it seemed to me that Robert could have shown a little more manly protective instinct. After all, he was the one who'd lured me away from my

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cozy cottage in the Orkneys to this boat on the Baltic Sea.

"I was the only one who didn't hafta upchuck, y'know," Heinz-Günther went on, digging a can of beer out of the sagging pocket of his sweatpants.

Karsten, our skipper, had planted me at the helm of his Maxi 1080 an hour ago, told me the course, and instructed me to "keep an eye on everything that happens around the boat, Rieke. And if there's a problem, just give me a shout." Somehow I didn't think he meant this kind of problem. And now he'd disappeared into the main cabin with his mysterious shipwrecked pal Knut to talk something over in private. Bernd, the sixth on board, lay in the aft cabin nursing his broken rib.

It was originally supposed to be a sailing tour for four: Karsten and his wife Evelyn, and Robert and I. On the Swedish yacht *Impedimenta*. A relaxed week of sailing around Fyn, Denmark's second-largest island. May in the Danish "South Sea." Instead, I was stuck on board with five men whose first act in the morning after setting sail was to pour themselves a schnapps and tip a sixth into the Baltic for good measure, "for Rasmus," so that the wind and waves would be kind to us. There was more schnapps when we tied up every afternoon. And one for the Baltic, "for Rasmus," if the wind and waves had been kind to us—or, if they hadn't been, to show we didn't take it personally.

"Y'know," said Heinz-Günther, after a pause.

"No," I replied. I didn't want to, either. I wanted to steer in peace, lose myself in my thoughts, stare placidly at my true love's black curls, and not have to talk to anyone.

"Y'know, there was somethin' funny about that boat."

Back then, in November, when he had storm training on the North Sea?

He bent over toward me; I could smell the alcohol on his breath and see the dandruff on his blond hair. Then he looked pointedly through the closed Plexiglas down the companionway into the main cabin, where Knut and Karsten had their heads together.

"Nah, I mean Knut's boat, the *Sea Otter*, y'know. How Arne went overboard when Knut was . . . Somethin' funny about that. Not right, somehow . . ." Heinz-Günther took a large swig of beer and went on with his tale. They'd all gone on board in Neustadt: Heinz-Günther, Arne, Bernd, and Knut, the skipper. Four men and a boat. They'd sailed out through the Bay of Lübeck, and on the way to Fehmarn Sound, Bernd had fallen through the hatch and broken a rib. They'd dropped him off for treatment at the hospital on Fehmarn, but he'd insisted on coming back to the boat and going on with the others.

"Would you have preferred it if Knut had broken off the tour?" I asked.

Heinz-Günther shook his head. "Well, no, uh, not really. At least,

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not then. But it's still funny, y'know?"

I muttered something incomprehensible. Knut, the skipper of the thirty-footer with the incredibly original name *Sea Otter*, took paying passengers on board occasionally to finance the upkeep on the boat—just like Karsten, our skipper. If he'd turned around that first day, he'd have had to give his passengers their money back. And everything on a boat, right down to the tiniest steel screw, seemed to cost three times as much as the exact same piece of equipment for any other form of transport—a problem sarcastically referred to as the "maritime surcharge." Which meant that Knut was probably not in a position to refuse the extra income. It wasn't just the purchase price of the yacht, either; he had expensive slip fees in the summer and storage fees in the winter, and frequent repairs to keep the boat seaworthy.

"But the thing is, Arne was always kind of a weird guy, y'know?" said Heinz-Günther.

A freckled hand pushed open the Plexiglas hatch, retreated, and then reappeared holding a mug of coffee. This was followed by a tousled blond head and a pair of very blue eyes. Was that from colored contact lenses? The men in my novels always had eyes that were naturally brilliant. Then came the rest of Bernd, moving very gingerly on account of the broken rib, which gave me plenty of time to look. My schooled romance-novelist's glance could immediately discern the athletic body under the sailing attire.

"Karsten said to bring you a cup of coffee and ask whether you want to be relieved."

"The coffee's great, but I can manage a while longer, thanks."

"See, I gave up drinkin' coffee years ago, 'cause it's really bad for you," said Heinz-Günther.

Bernd rolled his eyes in exasperation, and Heinz-Günther pondered the last few drops at the bottom of his beer can. Then he got up and climbed reluctantly down the companionway, presumably in search of replenishments, and Bernd sat down in the vacated seat.

"You doing okay?" he asked.

He was obviously looking for conversation as well as playing the role of coffee bearer. Robert was still on the foredeck, apparently lost in thought, because he made no move to rescue me from strange men sharing confidences. What was the point of being married, for Pete's sake?

Luckily, the sea was reasonably calm, the wind blew with a gentle three Beaufort astern, and the sun was fighting its way through the thick clouds. I was standing at the wheel of a thirty-six-footer listening to the gulls scream, the wind blow, and the water gurgle, and it could have been so wonderful if it weren't for—

"It was nice of you to let us come along," said Bernd.

"Don't thank me," I mumbled. Nobody'd asked me what I wanted anyway.

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"How well do you know Karsten and his wife?"

"Why?" I responded, startled by the question.

"Oh, just wondering."

Men didn't "just wonder." He was after something. Not that it interested me.

I looked around me, checked the log, compass, and wind direction, and was satisfied with the result. The wheel was steady under my hand, the bow sliced cleanly through the waves, and little flecks of foam tumbled over each other in the steely blue water. To starboard I could see the Danish peninsula, to port the island of Fanø. The places we were passing had names like Gammel Albo and Sönder Stenderup. I could just make out the campground at Stenderup Hage, and then we were past it and Lillebelt spread out before us. The shore seemed to recede; houses, streets, and piers moved backward and the water took center stage. The waves were already a little higher.

"Have you sailed with Karsten a lot?" Bernd asked.

"No," I said. Behind me I could hear Heinz-Günther rummaging for something in the aft cabin. And through the Plexiglas I could see that Knut and Karsten were still deep in their conversation.

"But you've known him a while?"

"No."

Why was Bernd forcing this conversation on me? I spent my days professionally stringing words together and the evening reading them aloud to myself to make sure they sounded right. Or I listened to the words Robert had spent the whole day stringing together. So I like to imagine my vacations as wordless as possible: I want to feel the wind in my hair, breathe in the salty air, and take in new images. And get my true love in the sack a lot, which was made impossible by the overcrowded yacht.

Bernd pushed shut the hatch, which Heinz-Günther had neglected to close completely, and looked at me pointedly. "And how did you get on board?"

"I climbed aboard at the bow."

"Just quit bullshitting me, would you?" he burst out, and then began to complain that women were normally so open and communicative, but the only one on board this shitty boat had to be me, of all people, who was tighter than a clam, and anyway you couldn't get a decent conversation started with anyone on this scow. If only his best friend were here, she'd talk to him, and if only he hadn't listened to his therapist, who'd prescribed a dose of male company. "You see what happens when men are by themselves?" he said, working himself up to a fever pitch. "Murder and mayhem!"

"An accident's not a murder."

"Accident? That's nonsense!" he snorted.

Crime fiction is actually Robert's specialty, but he had chosen not to participate in this conversation. I wondered whether the wind

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was carrying scraps of it down to where he lay on his back on the foredeck, his bony knees in the air.

"That was no accident," Bernd insisted. "Knut deliberately steered the boat into the shallows so that Arne'd go overboard."

A gust of wind hit the sails and took the yacht a little off-course. More gusts followed. The wind had shifted slightly. I fumbled with the jib sheet, trying to alter the position of the headsail. The break in the smooth motion of the boat hadn't been lost on Karsten, the old sea dog; he opened the hatch, threw a glance at the position of the sails, winked at me, and disappeared again below deck. He and Knut must have had a lot to say to each other.

Bernd had a lot to say, too. He'd been below deck, he said, when he'd heard a horrible booming noise, and then a dull thud. And only much later had Knut called out, "Man overboard!" but by then you couldn't see Arne anymore.

There could be a dozen reasons for that, I thought. Knut's boat had just run aground. His first thought probably wasn't to go and see where his crew was. "One hand for yourself, one for the boat," Karsten had preached. And with the stiff wind from the northeast at seven Beaufort like it was that day, nobody ought to be moving around without a life vest and safety tethers.

"Anyway, Arne didn't just go overboard. That guy never went overboard before."

Most people don't get much opportunity, I thought. Not in May, when it's only forty-one degrees in the Baltic Sea. Fifteen minutes. If they don't pull you out by then, you don't stand a chance. And they hadn't been able to find Arne in time. Not with an unmaneuverable boat and the waves so high. Knut had radioed for help, and the Danish rescue team, which knew every current and every vortex, had finally discovered Arne's body. But Bernd wouldn't accept Arne's not being tethered as an explanation for the accident.

"He didn't need that. He was absolutely sure-footed on the boat."

With the wind from the northeast at seven Beaufort, strong gusts, and the boat run aground? But Bernd couldn't be dissuaded. Somebody must have "helped" Arne overboard, and he had his suspicions. Knut must have pushed Arne in. Knut had said Arne'd gone overboard from the force of the blow when the boat ran aground, but anyone could say that.

I'm no crime-fiction specialist, but I've learned one thing from Robert: For despicable acts like pushing a man overboard, there's usually a motive. While I was thinking about what that might be in this case, Bernd leaned forward confidentially again.

"Knut did it for your skipper! They're friends, you know."

This made no sense to me.

"Arne was having an affair with Karsten's wife!" said Bernd, in a tone that suggested that this was common knowledge. "He wanted to come on the *Impedimenta* with you guys so that he could get a

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closer look at Karsten, but Karsten said he only took couples."

"And why would he want to take a closer look at Karsten?" I asked.

"Because Evelyn didn't want a divorce, and Arne wanted to see if there was anything he could do to change that."

What had Bernd just said about murder and mayhem among men? Small wonder, if they routinely tackled such a delicate situation so ham-handedly. Even so, I just didn't believe his murder theory.

"Have you told the police about your suspicions?"

Bernd shook his head. "I don't speak any Danish. Besides, Knut was always there with me."

"And where was Heinz-Günther all this time?" I wanted to know.

"Probably lying around drunk below deck." Bernd waved his hand dismissively. "He's only good for two things: drinking too much and making stupid remarks."

I made a noncommittal noise that could have meant anything. Then I asked Bernd to relieve me at the wheel and headed for the foredeck for a clarifying discussion on the protective duties of a husband, but Robert was asleep.

That evening, we tied up in the harbor at Assens on the island of Fyn. I was burning to tell Robert everything that had been forced on me that day in spite of my pointed uncommunicativeness and all my signals that I wanted to be left alone. Didn't he always say that there are just two motives for crime—love and money? That is, assuming that Bernd's suspicions had some truth to them? On the other hand, I still couldn't believe that Knut would endanger his boat and his fellow sailors just to get rid of his best friend's wife's lover. Weren't there more reliable methods? I gave the matter some thought, but nothing better occurred to me.

I couldn't ask my crime-fiction expert, however, because instead of taking a long, romantic walk with me, he'd let himself be talked into playing cards with the others: skat with schnapps. At the end of every hand, a coin toss decided whether the winner or the losers of that hand got a shot of schnapps.

I can't play skat and I don't like schnapps. So I went for a walk by myself and sat for a while on a park bench near the harbor. It had grown chilly, and I was grateful for the thick sweater I'd packed. I sat and watched the yachts coming and going in the harbor, but eventually it got too dark to see. Suddenly I smelled pipe smoke, and before I could draw any conclusions from this fact, Knut dropped onto the bench beside me. His dark hair and beard made him look grim under the dim harbor lighting.

"You're not playing skat?" I asked unnecessarily.

"I was trying to reach my wife, but no one answers the phone. And then I had to phone the police. Tomorrow I can pick up the *Sea*

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Otter at Fredericia."

"Good," I said. "I mean, that you can get your boat back."

"Not much else good has happened lately."

I folded my arms over my chest. "I'm sorry your other passenger was killed."

Knut nodded. "If I just hadn't made so many mistakes . . ."

"What kind of mistakes?" I asked.

"First off, I believed the guys I took with me. They insisted on sailing around Fyn. I said, 'Guys, we've got a stiff northeast wind and it's gonna stay like that for days. We'll have to sail head to wind if we want to go around Fyn, and that's a pain. Let's pick a different route.' But they said no, that wouldn't bother them, they had all kinds of sailing experience, years and years and years . . . Well, they didn't do too badly when we started out, but when we sailed out of Fehmarn Sound, it was really rough going. One of them broke a rib because he was fooling around near the companionway, not holding on; the next one's hanging over the railing the whole time, barfing up his guts; and the third one can't be bothered to tether himself, and goes overboard. It was a nightmare." He kept running his hand slowly through his beard, as if to calm himself.

"You couldn't know that ahead of time," I said.

"But the shallows, I should've known about those," he countered. "Normally I don't have any trouble at that spot, but the wind'd been bad for days and as strong as it was, it was obvious the water would be shallower there. I'm not a beginner!"

No, that he wasn't. If I'd understood Karsten correctly, the two of them had been sailing on the Baltic for almost thirty years. But did you ever really know everything? At least, I wouldn't have thought the water level could change so much. But then, I was just a hobby sailor.

"Did you know them all before the tour?"

Knut shook his head. "No, otherwise I wouldn't have taken them. I'm sorry you got saddled with them. But I don't know what else I could have done." He got up heavily, put a finger to his hat in salute, and left me sitting on the bench alone.

The next morning, the sky was a uniform shade of gray and the wind blew strongly—from the northeast, what else? I aired out the main cabin, which still smelled of schnapps and men after yesterday evening, and was just pouring myself a cup of coffee when Heinz-Günther emerged from his cabin.

"I gave up drinkin' coffee years ago, y'know, 'cause it's really bad for you," Heinz-Günther commented on my breakfast. He sat down next to me at the table, took a piece of raisin bread, and spread liverwurst on it, washing this down with a can of cola with rum.

"Where's Bernd?" he asked when he was finished.

"He seems to have signed off," said Knut, emerging from the

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head. He had dark rings under his eyes and his face was gray with fatigue. Bernd had disappeared during the night, taking all his belongings. Fine, I thought. One man fewer to pee all over the toilet seat and talk at me all the time. After my conversation with Knut yesterday evening, I was finding Bernd's *idée fixe*—namely, that Knut had murdered Arne—completely ridiculous anyway.

Later that morning, as I strolled the streets of Assen with Robert, admiring the beautifully renovated little townhouses, I had almost forgotten Bernd and his theory. Knut had left right after breakfast to make the minimum repairs necessary to the rudder so that he could take the *Sea Otter* home. One more man off our ship. That could only improve the sanitary conditions.

The goodies in the shop window of the bakery looked so inviting that I couldn't resist going in. Without much knowledge of Danish, mostly by smiling and pointing, I bought a whole bag of pastries for later, with coffee. Robert stayed outside; it was embarrassing to him to watch me massacre the language.

While we were considering whether to sail to Faaborg or directly to Troense, near Waldemar's Castle—Karsten thought it was important to show us some of Denmark's cultural treasures—it started to rain. Steadily and continually. The sky didn't look as if the weather was planning to change any time soon, so Karsten suggested taking the bus to Odense to see the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen. Heinz-Günther wasn't interested in culture and decided to "wander around" on his own. Karsten then assigned him the task of scrubbing the deck in our absence. Heinz-Günther's excuse that he was "here on vacation and not to slave away" made absolutely no dent in Karsten's insistence; Heinz-Günther had successfully managed to evade every bit of work on board thus far.

We returned to the boat for dinner, where I ventured the opinion out loud over Norwegian pollock in herb sauce that any boat of mine would need to have an oven, because I liked pollock much better when it was baked with an herb crust.

"Shipwife's nonsense!" grumbled Robert, who was unfortunately sitting too far away for me to kick his shins. I recommend that every woman who receives a proposal of marriage test her prospective husband under extreme conditions before deciding. Suddenly, I wasn't so sure about Robert anymore.

For dessert, I offered the pastries I had bought earlier.

"Dessert? I don't eat that anymore, haven't for years. Got too many calories, y'know?"

"And what about alcoholic beverages? Don't they have any calories?" I asked Heinz-Günther.

"Nah, what little I drink, I sweat that all out again!"

The next morning we sailed from Assens to Faaborg, where we wanted to tour Faaborg Jail, which had been turned into a muse-

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um when the prison was decommissioned. The wind was at only two Beaufort and there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but Heinz-Günther stood proudly at the helm wearing a sou'wester, a green rain jacket, a life vest, and a safety tether. And holding a can of beer. Cheers. I joined Robert on the foredeck in the hope of a little romantic smooching; I didn't want to give up on our young marriage just yet.

"You know what's strange?" asked Robert instead.

"No."

"I saw Knut in Assens yesterday."

"So?"

"I waved to him, but he pretended he hadn't seen me. You were in the bakery."

"Maybe he really didn't see you," I said soothingly, and snuggled up to him; this was a signal to him that we were now segueing to the romantic part.

"He had to have seen me. But just then another man walked up to him, speaking Russian, I think it was, and the two of them had an argument. At least, it looked pretty threatening. I think the other guy was carrying a concealed weapon."

I suspected that my true love's crime-writer's imagination was running away with him. He'd just finished a manuscript and was hunting for material for the next one. But when he was in that mood, there was absolutely no point in my trying for romance. I gave up on snuggling and told him about Bernd's theory and my conversation with Knut.

"None of it fits together," said Robert. "Unless Karsten and Arne are with the Secret Service and Knut's working for the Russians."

I rolled my eyes.

"You see the island over there?" Karsten had called me to the helm. "That's Aerö. And the church tower in the distance? That's the steeple at Söby. Just aim straight for it," he said, and vanished below deck.

I had barely taken the wheel when Heinz-Günther appeared and stuck to me again like glue.

"See, if it was my boat, y'know," he started in. "If the *Sea Otter* was my boat, I'da sent somebody, I wouldn'a gone myself."

"But it's not your boat," I growled.

"I just mean, if it was," said Heinz-Günther.

"Maybe Knut didn't have the money to send someone else," I said. "Maybe—"

"He's got the bucks for other stuff, y'know?" Heinz-Günther went on, his tone increasingly whiny. "I know that for a fact. And if you haven't got the bucks to send someone, you haven't got 'em for a boat. That's how it is."

"Exactly what are you trying to say?" I asked, replaying Robert's wild fantasies from yesterday evening at top speed.

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Heinz-Günther upended his can of beer. "I'm sayin' he's got the bucks, see, 'cause I saw it for myself."

"What did you see for yourself?"

"All that caviar he's got on board, y'know? I mean, I don't eat that anymore, haven't for years. It's disgusting, that stuff—fish eggs, yuck."

Caviar? On board a luxury yacht, maybe, but on Knut's thirty-foot sailboat? First, I agreed with Heinz-Günther that caviar was among the things nobody needed. And then I asked him how he knew about it. He evaded the question for a while, went on sucking the last drops from his can of beer and moving toward the companionway as if he wanted to disappear below deck, probably in the direction of his beer stash.

"I won't tell a soul, Scout's honor," I said conspiratorially. And at that moment it paid off that I hadn't been quite as unpleasant to him as the others.

"Well, I guess I can tell you. See, it was that time, that night, I ran out of beer. And then I got to thinkin', maybe Knut's got some in the hold, 'cause, well, the boat's always riding so deep, and I was thinkin', Knut's got beer and schnapps down there, and then I can borrow some. But it was just caviar. And not little jars, either, like your granny gets at the supermarket for Russian eggs or something, y'know? It was really big cans. And not even any vodka with it!" His voice betrayed deep disappointment at this last fact.

"Thanks for telling me," I said. He nodded briefly and went off in the direction of his beer.

I would have steered toward the church steeple at Söby for hours. I would even have sailed right into the church, the townscape permitting, if it meant I had my peace and quiet. But Heinz-Günther had barely disappeared in the direction of his cooler when Karsten took his place. My dear sweet husband Robert was—on the foredeck, naturally. He was practicing knots and doubtless thinking up new fictional crimes while I was smack in the middle of the real thing, so to speak. A real crime. Because my brain had quickly made the connection between caviar and Russians packing concealed weapons. Maybe I was just conjuring up a cliché, but unfortunately, I never got the chance to think about that.

"I need to ask you something," said Karsten.

"Ask away," I said bravely and stared even harder at the church tower of Söby.

"You talked to Bernd for quite a while."

"Mmmm." Actually, it would be more precise to say that he talked to me.

"What'd he say?"

That he thinks your best pal's a murderer. "He was pretty upset about Arne's death. They'd evidently known each other for a long time."

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"Really? I didn't know that. And what else?"

Before Karsten could start in with the "just wondering" business, I chose open confrontation. "Why do you want to know what Bernd told me?"

"Because . . . because . . . I don't know how to say it."

Preferably condensed. "Just spit it out."

"Bernd—I, that is . . . Bernd's dead."

The church tower at Söby vanished for a second, but then I had it again in my sights.

"How'd it happen?"

"I don't know much myself. He was found shot to death in the harbor in Fredericia, near Knut's boat."

Oho. "When?"

"Yesterday evening. The police questioned Knut. First the accident with Arne, and now another passenger shot dead. Knut's not allowed to leave the city."

Karsten, as it developed, wanted to turn around—would I ever get to see the church tower at Söby up close?—and go back to Fredericia, to be there for Knut. He offered to pay our way home and return the money we'd paid for the tour, but Robert wanted adventure and I was his wife. Even Heinz-Günther declined the chance to leave.

The weather was horrible all the way to Fredericia. We had to sail head to wind and waves and finally resorted to the motor, because we had neither the room nor the patience to tack at Lillebelt. Karsten's worries had infected us all.

"Will you admit I was right?" said Robert, as we stood in the pantry listening to the grinding of the diesel motor and setting out coffee and cookies for us all. "Something's fishy here. Presumably Bernd wanted to go back to the *Sea Otter* and look on his own for proof that Arne was murdered," he went on. "But what could he find?"

I told him of Heinz-Günther's discovery of the caviar.

"Slowly the pieces are coming together," Robert said. "What if Knut's using his boat to smuggle caviar?"

"Then he'd make enough money that he wouldn't need to offer tours to paying guests," I replied.

"But he'd have to go on doing that as cover," Robert insisted.

"And who's Bernd, then? A police detective, undercover? A spy? And what about Arne?"

Robert considered. "Maybe Bernd and Arne are working together. Knut could have discovered that they were on his heels. Maybe he just waited for a gust and then deliberately maneuvered the boat so that Bernd would fall and hurt himself; that was his way of trying to get rid of him. That would explain why Bernd was so intent on staying on board."

That it would, but I couldn't imagine Bernd, with his best friend

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and his psychotherapist, as a police detective. Or were they just part of the perfect cover? At any rate, there were too many maybes in that scenario for me.

"I don't believe Bernd's murder theory," I said. "You've seen how much Knut loves that boat. He wouldn't run it aground just to send Arne overboard."

Robert sighed. "Women's logic. Men are always destroying what they love. Don't you read the newspaper?"

Just then, Knut radioed the boat and told us where we could find him at the harbor in Fredericia. The autopsy on Bernd wasn't complete, but he'd been shot with a Russian weapon. The gun, however, was missing.

"The police were really disappointed that there were no powder traces on my hands and no pool of blood on the boat," Knut said. He was trying for a lighthearted tone but it was evident how hard that was. Unless that was just the radio's interference. After Knut signed off, Robert said pedantically that a Russian weapon meant absolutely nothing; you could get them by the dozen at flea markets.

It was already getting dark by the time we were under the bridge and could see Fredericia.

"Rieke, what Heinz-Günther said is beginning to make sense. Knut's yacht really is lying much too low in the water."

"I know," I countered. "First of all, I'm not blind, and second, Karsten's always complaining that Knut has mountains of unnecessary equipment along."

"That might be true, but I want to know what's going on on that boat."

"You sure you're not just after a free can of caviar?" I snapped.

The *Impedimenta* was moored in the furthest corner of the harbor, not far from the garbage dumpsters, which perfumed the air. I couldn't understand Robert. Why in the world did he have to get involved? None of them—not Knut, not Bernd or Arne—were particular friends of his, and if the police hadn't found any traces of blood on the *Sea Otter*, maybe that's because there weren't any to find.

"I'm not saying that Knut shot Bernd, but don't you think there are just too many coincidences here? Two men who know each other well take a sailing trip together and both of them have fatal accidents? While the skipper's arguing with armed Russians and has a hold full of caviar?"

From my point of view, the words "men," "sailing tour," and "accident" could be combined in any number of meaningful ways, but I had to admit that it got more difficult when you added "Russians" and "caviar." My silence didn't impress Robert.

"I want to find out what's really going on here," he said.

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"So do the police, and tomorrow you can tell them all about the Russians and the caviar," I said, in what I hoped was a particularly discouraging tone. It didn't work.

"We're going to go on board the *Sea Otter* and take a look for ourselves. Knut said he wanted to get a beer with Karsten. Nothing can happen to us."

I wasn't sure which part of this undertaking I liked the least. But we all know how it goes: In sickness and in health, in foolishness and in stupidity . . . Go spy on other people with Robert, or sit around without him? I went.

We snuck down the pier until we got to Knut's slip. I felt like Ellen Barkin sneaking after Dennis Quaid in *The Big Easy*, except that I hoped there'd be fewer dead people in our case. Quietly we went on board the *Sea Otter*, opened the hatch, climbed down the companionway, and locked the hatch from the inside. Robert had broken the police seal without batting an eye, and I decided I found his air of unscrupulousness attractive. Even so, I couldn't stop thinking of Bernd, who'd probably also crawled around Knut's boat and would never be able to tell anybody what he'd found. I stood at the bottom of the ladder, my palms sweaty, while Robert searched the yacht with a flashlight. He found what he was looking for in the foreship, and waved to me to come. Just then, the *Sea Otter* rocked and I almost fell into his arms.

"It was caviar after all," he said, holding up a big can so I could see it. "Knut's smuggling Russian caviar. Look at this." He ran the flashlight across can after can. All the storage space was full of it. "And the boat's not listing in the water, so there must be other stashes besides this one."

"But I can't imagine anyone killing someone else over a little caviar," I said.

"That's why you write romance novels," said Robert. "Maybe Bernd interrupted the buyers when they were picking up the merchandise, and they shot him. Or maybe Knut—"

There was a noise behind us and we turned, startled, in perfect choreography. Knut was facing us. Robert still held the can of caviar.

There was a strange calm in Knut's glance, as if he knew exactly what he needed to do. My heart tried to get out through my ears and got stuck along the way. Robert's hand, still holding the can of caviar, began to tremble. The radius and speed were perfect for a martini that was shaken, not stirred.

"And now?" asked Knut.

Robert and I shrugged our shoulders, again in perfect choreography. Maybe we had a future in synchronized swimming. *If* we had a future. All three of us stood for a long time without saying anything. Finally Knut stretched out his hand, and Robert handed him the can of caviar.

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"I'll take care of everything," said Knut, as if that explained it all—the caviar smuggling, Arne's and Bernd's deaths . . .

I was still standing there as if rooted to the ground, my mouth as dry as the Sahara. I didn't dare say anything.

"You could help me cast off," said Knut. He nodded in the direction of the companionway. Silently we moved past him, and he brought up the rear. I kept expecting to hear the noise of a gun's safety catch, but nothing happened. We simply went on deck.

Knut looked around him, and then started the motor. "Cast off stern lines!"

I heaved in the mooring lines and piled them neatly on the deck. "Stern lines are off," I croaked.

"Then go on, get off!"

Obediently we clambered down onto the dock. My heart was still hammering and drowned out all the questions lined up in my mind, waiting to be asked.

"Cast off head lines!" called out Knut, and pulled the fender on board.

We unbent the head lines and threw them onto the *Sea Otter*.

"Head lines are off."

Knut nodded at us, and puttered very slowly backwards out of the slip. Then he put the motor in forward gear and left the harbor as night fell. We watched the yacht until its position lights disappeared in the distance.

"Did you understand that?" I asked Robert.

"I might," he answered. And that was all.

In Robert's crime novels, at the end the bad guy always explains what he's done and why he did it. Knut didn't do that at all. He just sailed off.

Robert and I still can't decide whether Knut killed Bernd and Arne. Anyway, I think highly of him for letting us go. We never saw him again. The *Sea Otter* was found three weeks later in Skaggerak, south of Norway, her sails torn and heavy damage to her hull. Knut's wife got quite a lot of money from the life insurance he'd taken out. His body was never found. ●

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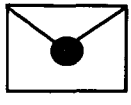

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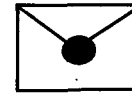

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STRANGE DAYS

by David A. Knadler

Loincloth, black loafers, and a foot-long Bowie knife: It wasn't a great look for an out-of-shape man in his sixties, especially one whose torso had not seen the sun since the Carter administration.

Mel Jordan seemed in the grasp of some strange emotion, probably not embarrassment. On the picnic table, he held the knife high as he balanced tenuously on one leg, eyes closed and face turned toward the patrol-car spotlight. He was humming something. From the pose, Deputy Sheriff John Ennis took it to be a tribal chant of some sort. He stepped closer and recognized the tune: "I Am Woman."

Four years ago, in November of 2003, David Knadler got his start as a fiction writer in our Department of First Stories. Born and raised in Montana, where this series starring cop John Ennis is set, he made his career as a newspaperman before settling down to create fictional characters and plots. He has worked for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Kansas City Star*, and the *Missoulian*.

Beside him, Kevin Heibein held a Taser at the ready, his mouth agape. "I don't believe this," the young cop said.

"Drop the knife and get down from there, Mel," Ennis called. "We need to talk."

Jordan let out a howl, followed by a couple of yips. It wasn't a bad imitation of a coyote. He began to prance around on the table, misjudged the location of the far edge, and tumbled headlong into the grass. The knife fell clear. Ennis rushed forward and kicked it away. Jordan cursed and flailed as they cuffed him and wrestled him into the back of the Crown Vic. Along the way, the loincloth came undone. The onlookers from the bar across the street began to applaud. Except for one. Ennis noticed a short guy in a Seattle Seahawks jersey, wearing what looked like a blond muskrat pelt on his head: He was peering at the back of a digital camera.

Back at the town hall, Heibein was clearly shaken by the incident. "The guy got me my job," he said. "Four, five years ago. I never pictured him in a loincloth. Shit, you think you know somebody."

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Ennis had to agree, the behavior was uncharacteristic for a small-town mayor. Especially one running for reelection.

"Phencyclidine," the doctor pronounced. "And more than a trace."

"PCP?" Ennis had considered the possibility, but was still surprised. "Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid so. Angel dust. Ozone." He clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in the chair. "We'd see it at the Vegas clinic. Wack, hog, sherms. Some call it elephant. Rocket fuel, killer weed, crystal supergrass . . . "

Ennis held up a hand. "I get it. So what, was he smoking it? Can you tell?"

"Some evidence of THC, so probably. But there are a variety of ways to get it into your system. Orally. Transdermal absorption. Even eyedrops."

Ennis rubbed his chin. "His wife says he's completely drug-free."

The doctor smiled. "Not completely, it seems."

"What about accidental exposure? Any way he could have come in contact with it without knowing?"

"This is not a chemical you see just lying around. I'd be very interested to know how the mayor got loaded on PCP without some kind of intent."

"His intent, or somebody else's?"

"I hadn't thought of that. Well. That's your bailiwick, isn't it?"

Mel Jordan's opponent in the mayor's race was Leonard Strange, an aging ex-hippie who lived in a home-built geodesic dome about a mile up the Gypsy Creek road. Judging by the few crude yard signs around town, he was running on a three-part platform: organic farming, world peace, and bringing to light the vast web of corruption at town hall. While he was well known in Worland, Montana, he was considered a long shot for the election. His campaign slogan, "Strange Days," had not captured the public imagination.

Chuck Butler was bringing Ennis up to date on local politics from his post behind the counter of the Town Pump, a convenience store and gas station at the edge of town. He punctuated his remarks with thoughtful pulls on a Big Gulp cup the size of a wastebasket. The current issue of the *Kootenai County Argus* was on the counter. A black-and-white picture of Mel Jordan atop the picnic table dominated the front page.

"Not exactly flattering," Ennis said.

"It can't help. Although he is twenty-five points ahead in the polls."

"Polls?"

"I talk to my customers."

"The beer-and-corn-dog demographic. What's the margin of error?"

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Chuck shrugged. "That kind of spread, it doesn't need to be scientific. Anyway, that was before he went all Colonel Kurtz on us. Who knows what it'll be tomorrow?"

"Nude rampage in a public park: I guess it could sway the undecideds. But still, Leonard the Strange . . . "

"Hey, stranger things have happened."

"Here? When?"

Chuck frowned, rubbed his jowls. "Actually, nothing comes to mind."

Ennis tapped the picture. "At least they blurred out this area here. Small favors." He studied the caption. " 'Photograph by Jerry Bork.' Who's that?"

"I've seen him around. Kid moved here last year from Colorado or someplace. Used to plant trees for the Forest Service. Now he mostly hangs out. And freelances for the *Argus*, apparently."

"Short guy with the blond mohawk? I think I saw him at the park. I don't know why he couldn't have gotten me in the picture. I thought I handled the whole thing rather heroically."

Chuck laughed. "Trust me, there's no upside to being in a picture with a naked bureaucrat. You should thank him."

"Maybe you're right." Ennis skimmed the brief story. "Speaking hypothetically, what would you think if you learned PCP was a factor in the mayor's performance?"

Chuck stared. "You're kidding me. Angel dust?"

"Some call it elephant," Ennis intoned. "We're speaking hypothetically."

"Hypothetically, I'd say it wasn't a great idea. Hindsight being what it is."

"What I mean is, you think Jordan has a thing for it? I hear he was something of a free spirit back in the day."

"Oh yeah, real radical. He had longish hair and listened to the Doors. Who didn't? Smoked a little weed, burned his fishing license, and told everybody it was his draft card. Big deal. I was a redneck, and I was more radical than that poser."

"Whatever. Returning to the point: You see him using drugs now?"

Chuck shook his head. "Nah. Doesn't even drink these days. Makes sure everybody knows it, too. Him and that wife of his, makes the funky pottery—she turned him into a vegan, you believe that? She's ragged on me about selling the fried chicken and malt liquor. Not the kind of folks who are going to grab a hit of angel dust to unwind. Hell, even lifelong stoners like Leonard Strange figured out that shit is bad news."

"Which brings me to my other hypothetical question."

"Wait a second. You're not thinking Leonard slipped his opponent a Mickey, are you? For political advantage? That would rock." Chuck pondered this. "But nah, I just don't see it. Guy really

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doesn't seem to want it that bad."

Ennis followed Leonard Strange as he padded around his garden trailed by a large gray cat.

The candidate was arrayed in a Lilith Fair T-shirt, knee-length cargo shorts, and a pair of Birkenstocks that may have been older than Strange himself. The gray hair that remained around the perimeter of his head was tied back in a frizzy ponytail. He was carrying a plastic bucket and tilted water onto plants at random intervals. Ennis looked around; none of them seemed to be cannabis.

"I don't know what to tell you, man. Weird. But also ironic, you know, because I heard he was making these innuendoes that I'm some kind of big drug user. Man, talk about the cat calling the kettle black."

"The pot."

"What? Oh, yeah, I've smoked it now and then." He chuckled. "But I never inhaled, you know?"

"This thing with the mayor; seems like it could help your election chances."

"Whatever, man. It might shed light on the man's basic hypocrisy, I guess. But the larger problem is globalization, big oil, Bush in the White House pulling the strings. Jordan's just working for the man. When the people get ready to rise up, make a difference, I'm here. If not, hey, it's all good." He thought for a moment. "Sort of."

Ennis adjusted his sunglasses. Chuck was right: It didn't seem the sort of political manifesto to inspire covert dirty tricks. Or much else. The cat sidled over and began rubbing against his leg. He reached down to pet it.

"So you're a candidate for mayor, but not really running, per se."

"It's like Buddha says, man. You've got to . . . " Strange's voice trailed off as he gazed skyward, searching for the phrase. "You know, just go with the flow."

"I noticed you did put up some yard signs."

"Oh, that. No, that's the kid. Weird dude. Said he'd take care of all the hassles if I just put my name out there. I said, 'Whatever, man.'"

"What kid is that?"

"Goes by Killa J. Wears a mohawk."

Mel Jordan had been released on his own recognizance. His demeanor was subdued. He led Ennis into a living room crowded with glazed ceramic objects of uncertain function. A show about Napoleon was playing on the History Channel.

The mayor collapsed into a leather La-Z-Boy and thumbed up the volume. He didn't look at Ennis.

"Waterloo," he said at last. "That's what I'm looking at. Twenty-one years of public service. And now this."

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"It's what I wanted to talk to you about. Have any ideas how PCP would show up in your blood test?"

Jordan bit his lip, staring at the TV. "That's another thing. Who gave permission for a blood test?"

"It's not like we needed permission, given that you were waving a knife and sideswiped those two cars with your Mustang."

Jordan put down the remote and looked up, his eyes watery. "I'm going to ask you a favor, John. It's important, it's my political life. I'm . . . I'm hoping there's some way you can help keep this out of the newspaper."

Ennis cleared his throat. "I take it you don't subscribe?"

"No, we won't take that rag. Since the new owners, it's nothing but gossip and innuendo. If they get hold of this, they're going to plaster it all over the front page."

"You think? Hate to be the one to break it to you, but they already have."

What color remained in Jordan's round face drained quickly away. He looked ill. "How can that be? They don't publish until Thursday."

"Today is Thursday."

The mayor stared, swallowed hard, then buried his face in his hands. "No. No. This is a nightmare." His shoulders began to shake. Ennis turned his hat in his hand as he waited. Presently Jordan lifted his head. His cheeks glistened.

"Listen, John; you've got to believe me. I've been set up. I swear. I think somebody did this. Did it to ruin me. This thing can't stand."

"Who would set you up? And how? I just talked with Leonard Strange. I really don't think he has anything to do with it."

"That burn-out? Neither do I, it's . . . " A door slammed and both men started. The mayor's wife, Margaret Stone-Jordan, stalked into the room holding a newspaper. She wore a mauve jumpsuit adorned with gaudy jewelry of her own design. She glared at Ennis. "Come to arrest him again? Be my guest."

She slapped the newspaper down on her husband's lap. "Looks like you're going to be having a lot more free time, dear. Maybe you can finally start going to a gym. This makes you look like Chris Farley. Except you're quite a bit older—and I don't think even he ever made such a total ass of himself."

Jordan looked at the photograph the way a condemned man might view a firing squad. Ennis was afraid he'd begin weeping again.

His wife paced back and forth in front of the TV. "Well, congratulations. You're now a laughingstock. *I'm* a laughingstock. They were whispering just now at JB's. Alana Winnett and that friend of hers. Laughing! At me! How could you have done this to us?"

Her voice had risen an octave. Her husband leaned forward in the recliner. "Look, Madge, I told you . . . "

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She pointed a finger. "Shut up. You told me what? Somebody set you up. Oh yes, right. How is that possible, Melvin? Unless you were someplace you shouldn't have been. At Westy's, with that bimbo assistant of yours? I think you're lying. I think you're drinking again. And I think you're going to tell me the truth now!"

"No! You've got to believe me. I swear . . ." Jordan's voice withered under his wife's gaze.

A taut silence ensued. On the TV, the narrator was describing Napoleon's death in exile. Ennis spoke first.

"You mentioned a bimbo?"

Stone-Jordan's red face got redder. "This isn't any of your business. Unless you're going to arrest this idiot for something else, I'm going to ask you to leave."

Ennis shrugged. "Well then."

Mel Jordan gave him a pleading look as he turned to go. Ennis returned a slight smile. "I guess I'll see you in court. If you'd like to talk about any of that beforehand, you have my number."

Ennis's cell phone rang before he got back to town.

"Sorry about that," Jordan said. "This is a tough time for her."

"No doubt."

"I'm outside; I have to make this quick. The point is, I really think I'm a victim here."

"So you said."

"Look, this has to be just between you and me, okay? There's a girl. A woman. We, uh, we went out that night. Just to talk. She's been having trouble with her boyfriend."

Ennis could hear the mayor take a deep breath.

"John, I'm ashamed to say this, but she offered me a joint. And I took it. Just to put her at ease, you know. I don't do drugs. Not for many years now. But she was so fragile, she needed a shoulder, a friend. We smoked it together. And then she got kind of upset and insisted I let her off, and . . . well, the next thing I know, I'm at the hospital. People giving me strange looks."

"You might have mentioned this earlier."

"You saw my wife. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Who's the woman?"

There was a long pause.

"Maria Knutsen. She's, uh, been working as my assistant. An intern from the community college down in Kalispell, just doing it for credit."

"So she slipped you some reefer laced with PCP?"

"No. Oh God, I can't imagine that. She was smoking it too. She has this ex-boyfriend. I think that's where she got it."

"Who's the boyfriend?"

"That's why I called. I finally made myself look at this picture in the paper. This horrible picture of me. Then I noticed who took it:

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Jerry Bork. I'm almost positive that's the boyfriend's name. The guy she's been having trouble with."

"So it's a love triangle: the mayor, the boyfriend, and the barely legal intern."

"You don't need to take that tone. You never made a mistake? Yes, she's young. She's sweet and naive, and it started out I just wanted to help her through a rough patch. But she's smart, John, and funny, she laughs so easily. And so, I don't know, caring. An angel, really. Just this angel who came into my life. I never thought . . ."

Ennis had begun to roll his eyes, but the mayor didn't finish the sentence.

"The PCP thing is kind of worrisome," Ennis said. "I'll talk to her."

"It's not her. I can't believe she meant me harm. It's the boyfriend. Has to be. He sounds like the jealous type. He's made threats."

Ennis thinking: older men and younger women. These things rarely ended well.

"I'll have a talk with him too."

Maria Knutsen did not fit the common perception of "bimbo," as Margaret Stone-Jordan had put it. She was young, yes, but in other particulars mostly ordinary. She was about five-two, with a roundish face framed by sensibly short brown hair. Not obese, but hardly petite. She wore a snug maroon sweater and hip-hugging pants topped by a slight bulge of pink flesh. She was clutching a file folder stuffed with papers when Ennis caught up to her outside the town hall.

"Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

She smiled uncertainly. "Um, I was just taking these over to the surveyor."

"This won't take long."

At Cafe Solaris across the street, Maria nervously stirred Sweet 'N Low into her coffee.

"I just feel terrible," she said. "I feel responsible in some way. He's such a kind man, and sweet. I mean, I wouldn't have been more surprised if my own grandpa had done something like that."

The age difference was about right, Ennis reflected.

"Maria, if you gave him a doobie laced with PCP, I'd concur: You're definitely responsible in some small way."

Her eyes grew wide. "What? I never . . . who told you that? Did he tell you that? I don't believe it! That bastard! He was the one who wanted to. He was all over me. . . ."

Ennis couldn't suppress a grim smile. The sweet, avuncular Mel Jordan had morphed abruptly into a lecherous swine.

"What did he tell you?" she demanded.

"Take it easy. He didn't blame you specifically. He thought maybe your boyfriend had given you the stuff. Without mentioning the PCP."

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Maria's hands were shaking. "PCP? I don't know anything about PCP." She stared at her cup, and then at Ennis. "Oh God. That could explain why I freaked out. After he dropped me off. I was so paranoid. Hysterical, practically. I thought it was just some kind of hormonal thing. I was just starting my period."

It was more information than Ennis required. He rubbed his forehead.

"Just tell me this: Did you get it from your boyfriend?"

"Ex-boyfriend. Said he was willing to let bygones be bygones. Sold it to me at cost. That bastard! He could have gotten me killed!"

The waitress was giving them odd looks.

"Just to clarify, we're talking about Jerry Bork?"

"He goes by Killa J now. He's got this rap thing going, wants to be a big gangbanger. Living in Podunkville, Montana. The idiot. He's the biggest mistake of my life. God, he went crazy when he found out about Mel and me, stalking me and calling my cell phone like every fifteen minutes. He's started carrying a gun, too. I hate his guts. I think you should put him in jail."

"What about Mel Jordan?"

"What? Oh, that. Like I said, he's sweet. He's old and everything, but I guess I was attracted to his power. His status." She gave him a wistful smile. "Like Monica and President Clinton. Just a corny old story, huh?"

"Have you met his wife?"

She made a face. "I know, I know. My bad. It's not like I want to marry him or anything. I mean, we hooked up a few times, but you know, he *is* really old. Older than you. No offense. Anyway, I'm going back to school next week. I'm kind of sick of Worland."

It was time for a talk with Jerry Bork, a.k.a. Killa J. Ennis stopped first at the *Argus*, but the publisher, Richard Cheney, only laughed.

"He tell you he worked here? Strictly freelance. Sold me the one picture of the mayor. Not really in focus, but it did kind of capture the essence of the man. Then he pitched a story about Jordan downloading child porn at town hall, but I passed on that. Shaky sources."

"He mention the name Killa J?"

"Yeah, you believe that? He wanted that in his credit line. I told him no way; this isn't some goddamn Internet chat room. We didn't part on the best of terms. Strange kid. Got kind of a short fuse."

"You know where I can find him?"

"Know where Pine View Court is?"

Ennis was familiar with it, having lived there for the past six years. Despite the common wisdom about small towns, he was acquainted with few of his neighbors.

"He gave me a number, said I could reach him at this trailer. In case I ever wanted more dirt on the mayor, I guess. He's staying

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with the Mower boys."

The Mower boys. Ennis was aware of them, too. A few times in the past year he'd been summoned to quell disturbances at the brothers' ramshackle single-wide, located on the far side of the trailer court from his own mobile manse.

As usual, the Mower residence looked like the site of a recent plane crash. Two pit bulls in a chain-link dog run watched Ennis drive up. They barked and hurled themselves against the fencing as he mounted the sagging steps. Explosive bass notes from inside rattled the aluminum siding and reverberated in the deputy's guts. Also, somebody was shouting profanities in rough accompaniment to the beat. It sounded a lot like every rap tune Ennis had ever heard.

Ennis hammered on the door, to no effect. He pounded harder, and this time kept at it until the music and the shouting suddenly ceased. The dogs were going berserk. He kept a nervous eye on them as he waited. At the window to his right, a curtain moved.

"Sheriff," he called. "Open up."

Given the din made by the dogs, Ennis realized later that he'd been lucky to hear the metallic *clack* on the other side of the door: the unmistakable sound of a pistol round being chambered. He was already moving left when the two loud pops came, and two holes appeared in the aluminum door.

Ennis jumped from the porch and landed atop the dog run. The frenzied creatures snapped at him through the chain link as it sagged under his weight. The trailer door exploded outward and the artist formerly known as Jerry Bork came out shooting, wearing the Seahawks jersey and a look of pure madness.

Ennis heard one round thrum past his head. One of the pit bulls screamed and fell, biting at a wound in its side. With an inarticulate cry, Bork leapt from the porch and stumbled into a sprint down the gravel lane toward the highway. Ennis rolled off the chain-link, grabbing for his own gun. One side of the fencing had come loose and the second dog began dragging itself beneath it, trembling with rage. Ennis racked a round. It was a moment of threat assessment: Bork or the dog? But the pit bull was no longer interested in him. It set off after the fleeing blond mohawk at a dead run, bleeding from two long scratches along its back. Little puffs of dust erupted from its blurring paws on the gravel.

Ennis kept the Glock pointed skyward as he brought up the rear, panting hard. Bork looked around in time to see the dog in mid-leap. He yelped as the pit bull brought him down. His gun went flying.

Ennis spotted Mel Jordan walking along Highway 37 toward town. He powered the window down as he eased up alongside.

"Need a ride?"

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"What do you think? I'm getting hypothermia out here."

The mayor climbed in. He seemed to have lost some weight in the past week.

"Car broke down?"

"No. Madge moved out, took the Lexus. Before leaving, she set fire to the Mustang."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Yeah, had the original 289. New paint. I loved that little pony. Well, easy come, easy go, right?"

"How's things with Maria?"

"That didn't work out either. Women."

Ennis drove on awhile in silence. They passed one of Leonard Strange's new signs tilting along the barrow ditch: "Strange for a Change."

"Looks like Leonard got another campaign manager. You still in the race?"

The mayor snorted. "What else am I going to do? Work at the mill?"

"How you doing in the polls?"

"According to Chuck, Leonard got a bounce from my troubles, but lost most of it over continuing concerns about his choice of campaign managers. Speaking of Chuck, why don't you swing in here for a second?"

He emerged from the Town Pump a few minutes later carrying two corn dogs. He handed one to Ennis.

"Here. I never apologized for going berserk in the park."

"I thought you were a vegan."

"That was then. My feeling now is, life's too short. So what's the word on that Bork kid?"

"Still in the hospital. I guess the pit bull was not a huge fan of hip-hop. When he heals up he's going away for a while. Besides the attempted homicide, that trailer was jam-packed with crap—reefer, ecstasy, PCP, you name it."

"Couldn't help sampling it himself, huh? Little scheme to take me down kind of backfired. Serves him right."

"Yeah, well. I hear he's looking on the bright side. Figures the scars and the prison time will give him some street cred. You know, as a rapper."

Jordan shook his head. "Kids today. Strange days, huh, Ennis?"

The deputy looked at the mayor, but he was now focused on applying mustard to the corn dog. Jordan took a bite and closed his eyes. The expression of transcendental bliss reminded Ennis of the night on the picnic table. He lifted his own corn dog in a sort of a toast as he pulled out onto the highway.

"Strange days indeed," he said.●

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ENTER COFFIN (RIGHT)

by Gwendoline Butler

"No," said Coffin firmly, or as firmly as he could when dealing with his wife. "I am not an actor and I will not act again.—*My Lord, the carriage awaits.*"

"You don't have to act, my love," said Stella, "just walk on the stage."

"Carrying a flag."

"Well yes, you do carry a flag."

"The Union Jack, I suppose."

"You couldn't carry the Union Jack as King Arthur."

"Oh, it's Arthur, is it?"

Their eyes met and they started to laugh.

They were sitting in the living room of their home in the tower block that overlooked the church-converted-to-a-theatre where Stella acted when she was not making a television series or a film. The dog sat across Coffin's feet; the cat lay on Stella's lap.

Stella was putting on a charity show in aid of children in need of a better education. It was to be hoped they would be grateful, Coffin thought, especially as the reason they were not getting the best education they could was because they were deaf. Some, he thought, might have preferred deafness.

She had been allocated two or three hundred pounds, which she had spent on a few professional performers and musicians, and now she needed another man, and the only one who could be pressed into a part and not paid was a husband.

"Will I have to wear a wig?"

"Not unless you want to."

"And go on stage?"

"Of course." Stella said. "Come to the theatre and walk on the stage. Practice."

Gwendoline Butler has been a highly regarded author of crime fiction for more than fifty years; she first appeared in this magazine in 1968. She is commonly credited as the inventor of the women's police procedural, for a series starring policewoman Charmian Daniels, written under her well-known pseudonym Jenny Melville. For her return to *EQMM*, Ms. Butler has chosen her popular series character Inspector Coffin. †

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"Make it lunchtime. This du Croy murder is filling my book. The Austrian ambassador is coming in. He's taken an interest in the case—du Croy claimed to be a count of some sort. I'll give you a sandwich and drink in the Prince of Wales pub opposite the theatre."

George du Croy was a banker and an attractive homosexual. Coffin thought that one of his lovers had strangled him. Du Croy had promised some money to Stella for one of her productions, which she would miss.

Both Stella and Coffin knew how George du Croy conducted his life, but they knew it from different sides. Stella had watched George work his way through several young actors, while Coffin knew that du Croy had also attracted one distinguished police detective, although Coffin had never been sure who had seduced whom.

"Wonder if he was ever married," said Stella.

Coffin did not answer for a while, finally saying: "Not his style."

Stella thought of all the actors she had known whose style it had not been either but who had found it convenient to have a wife—the so-called "lavender marriage."

"I thought you were that way yourself when I first met you."

"But you made it your business to find out," said Coffin drily. "I always wondered what it was that started you off."

"I have to admit it was partly that woman that kept writing books about you. . . . I thought she might get me some publicity."

"And did she?"

"Not a lot."

"Lunch," said Coffin firmly. "And I mustn't be late."

"The Austrian ambassador, I suppose."

"I have other crimes, other murders to worry me, too." There always were such in the Second City of London; it was criminous and violent as well as having a beauty of its own as it looked down on the Thames. It was an old part of London that had made ready to repel the Armada and later had welcomed the victory of Trafalgar.

Stella was at the Prince of Wales before Coffin. She was sitting by a window with her fluffy white peke on her lap. He raised his head when he saw Coffin and let a low, soft noise come from his throat.

"He doesn't like me," said Coffin. He put down the smoked salmon and the white wine.

"No, he's just saying hello."

"That was a growl. He doesn't like me. . . ."

"Did you buy him a sandwich?"

"No, I did not."

"I think that's what he wants . . . not smoked salmon, though, but ham or cheese . . ."

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"No mustard, I suppose?" said Coffin.

The Prince of Wales was popular with the local theatre crowd, a small group of whom were sitting near the bar. They were talking intensely. Perhaps performers always did, Coffin thought.

"They're going at each other," said Coffin.

Stella shrugged. She knew them all, of course, not well, but when you had been acting as long as she had, you could put a name to most faces. Besides which, this group had been in several recent productions.

Bob Taylor, Adam Makin, Jany Blanchard, and her close friend Virginia Gold. And Tim, of course.

"That's a pretty lethal look," said an interested Coffin.

"Oh, I don't think they'll kill each other . . . too many other people are ready to do it for them."

"One of them is crying."

"Probably just lost his part in a good production." Stella bit cheerfully into her sandwich.

All three ate. The dog dragged his sandwich to the floor, where he tore it between teeth and paws.

"Better go over to the theatre so you can try your voice out."

"You said I didn't have to speak."

"Just an odd word or two."

"If I didn't love you, I'd hate you," said Coffin.

"Eat your sandwich," said Stella. She thought Coffin did not look happy. Worried. "Are you all right?"

"Touch of indigestion . . . mental only."

Coffin looked down at his hands, which held his sandwich; they looked white and grey.

"I trained you two to that," he said. He addressed his hands. *When there is trouble, you instruct me (is that the word?) to worry. I know now what to worry about: the message on the telephone, voice unknown:*

"I am going to get you, and if not you, then your wife."

He pushed this to the back of his mind, not the first threat of this type he had received in his long career, but he always hated it when Stella came into it, even though she always escaped, sometimes at the last minute like in the old film serials.

With the little white dog trotting gamely forward, they made their way to the theatre. The dog knew the route well, since he went regularly with Stella when she was performing there. He was, in fact, a well-known local figure, and if he had been found wandering alone in the city, would have been led back to Stella.

He was the first into the theatre, where he stopped short and growled.

A low, deep growl, quite unlike the earlier one that day.

"Now he's angry," said Coffin.

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But Stella knew the dog better. "No, he's not, he's nervous. Something has frightened him." She picked up the dog, who struggled in her arms.

Coffin was looking at the stone-flagged floor. "That's blood."

A drop of blood lay in front of him. One, two, three.

He marched forward through the side passage.

"That's onto the stage," called Stella as she followed after him.

"Has there been a war play or a thriller with a lot of blood being produced?"

"Shakespeare," gasped Stella as she followed him, still carrying a struggling dog. "'Midsummer Night's Dream.'"

"Sure it wasn't 'Macbeth'?"

His voice trailed away. On the floor was the body of a man. Coffin knelt down beside it. He studied the face, which was bloodied, as was the man's neck. The man's features were neat and regular; he looked about thirty, but it was hard to be sure through the blood. Coffin felt he knew the face.

He looked up at Stella, who was staring down at the body.

"Who is he?"

"He's an actor. Tim Hall. He's been assisting in rehearsing the next production here. He's a close friend of the producer."

Coffin raised an eyebrow in question.

"No, nothing to do with me . . . It's Bert Illiffe who's the producer. He wanted Hall badly, he brings in the critics."

Coffin knew that Bert Illiffe was on a short contract to produce plays in the theatre created out of the old church. He had been a big success. Coffin didn't remember meeting him and his close friend and ally, and now Tim was dead. Possibly Bert was too. Coffin had noticed these deaths could go in pairs.

"He's been dead for some time . . . he's cool. . . . No, don't touch him, I must get the murder squad in."

Stella nodded. "You're going to ask me what about Tim and Bert. . . . They quarrelled. And now Tim is dead." And where was Bert?

Coffin pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket. He knew who could come: Chief Inspector Willy Freedom (who lost no opportunity to be close to his boss) and Inspector (recently promoted from Sergeant) Mary Adams. There would be others, too. Good officers all through, or they wouldn't be where they were.

He drew Stella away from the body. "Any idea how this happened? No, I suppose it's not fair to ask."

"Someone will ask me, though," said Stella who had not been Coffin's wife without learning something of how the police worked. "With du Croy and now this, you have got a lot on."

"I won't be doing the actual investigation," said Coffin just a fraction coldly. Stella ought to remember that he had got past that stage. "I have the overall responsibility, of course."

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Stella, picking up her tactlessness at once, said hastily that of course she knew that. "And Willy Freedom is a good officer, I know."

This was tactless too, as she knew and he knew that Willy was a very handsome man who had shown clear signs of liking Stella. He also knew that Willy had his little coterie of young constables (no sex please, we're British, but the feeling was generally reputed to be there).

Mary Adams was the usual woman career officer, hard-working, polite, and knowledgeable about what was going on, but discreet, not to say silent, about it all.

Chief Inspector Willy Freedom knew how to hold on to information also. When Coffin asked him about the case later, he said, "It's going very slowly, sir. It's early days. I can tell it's going to be one of those murders that takes time, and after all, sir, we haven't had much of that."

This was true, as Coffin admitted to himself.

"It would be a help if the knife that was used could be found," he said.

It was one of Coffin's duties to take Stella's little dog for an early-morning walk. Stella claimed that performers always slept late if they could because they worked late so often.

"When I am filming or doing TV work, you do not hear me complain, do you?" she said.

"No," admitted Coffin, "although you look a bit grim sometimes."

"Thanks." She rubbed some anti-wrinkle cream on the skin under her eyes. "I wonder if this stuff works."

"You haven't got any wrinkles."

"It does work then . . . or something does." She looked at him and smiled. "Or just naturally good skin."

"I should have said that."

"So you should have, but I've said it for you." She patted the dog, who was sleeping beside her. "And take this one for a walk, he's a bit constipated."

"It's all that chicken you let him have. Come on, you."

The dog knew to come.

There was a large stretch of grass, a former graveyard, near the theatre, which Stella felt she owned, although she did not, and this was where the dog took his morning run. He liked it and galloped forward as usual.

There was an old gardener who valued his grass, but he was a dog lover and an admirer of Stella. He also knew Coffin to be a top policeman, so all in all it was a good place for the dog to run.

"Morning, sir," said the gardener.

"Morning, Jim."

"You're out early, sir."

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"Just walking the dog for Her Ladyship." He rarely called Stella *Her Ladyship* but somehow to old Jim it seemed the right way.

A thick hedge of shrubs made a verge round the grass. Into this the little dog galloped. He usually took a look in there.

Jim gossiped away. He always knew all the tales of the town, which he enjoyed passing on to Coffin, who usually knew them already, but he listened.

"Did you know that Dilly Unwin, who is the public librarian, won't have any books in the library with swear words?"

"Can she keep them out?" said Coffin. "And how does she know if she doesn't read them?"

Jim laughed. "She didn't tell me that."

Coffin looked at his watch. "That dog is taking his time."

"He's got something," said Jim. "I can hear him scrabbling away."

"Probably a rat."

"I'll take a look."

Jim pushed his way into the bushes. Coffin lost sight of him. He was gone for a few minutes. When he emerged he was carrying the dog. The dog had something in his mouth.

"See what he's got?"

The dog was holding a knife, handle end, with his teeth. His eyes shone brightly above his treasure, but whereas normally there was a friendly look in his eyes, as if he knew you and was pleased to see you, now the look was distant.

"He looks as though he could eat me," said Coffin.

"It's the blood on the blade." Jim took a closer look. "Got some on his whiskers too, he's done a proper job on that knife. . . . I expect he liked the taste."

"Can't take him back to Stella looking like this," said Coffin.

"He won't eat her." Jim was enjoying it.

"I wouldn't like him even to think of it."

"As soon as he sees her, he'll calm down . . . he's only a little dog, sir, not a tiger."

But Coffin knew what the blood meant, while Jim did not; it was human blood.

This was the knife that had killed Tim—something else Jim did not know.

But Jim had been working things out. "You've had a murder here, haven't you? A chap was stabbed. I reckon this was the knife that did it. . . . Your lot will want it."

"Yes," said Coffin. His mouth suddenly felt dry. "Don't touch it." He pulled his newspaper from his pocket, wrapping it round the knife as he pulled it gently from the dog's mouth. The dog did not growl or struggle; perhaps he didn't like the taste of Tim's blood after all. "Forensic stuff, Jim."

But Jim was a great reader of detective stories, especially American ones, and was well up in forensic details such as blood groups

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and hair. Coffin, who knew a great deal more about such subjects, had no intention of discussing them with Jim.

Coffin watched as the clump of bushes and trees were searched by a small team of forensic scientists.

"If there's anything else here, we'll find it, sir," said the sergeant in charge. He was keen to find something more with John Coffin there. It was always a good thing to impress the boss. "The knife had been buried but not very carefully, just stuck in the ground, really. It wasn't hard for the dog to find it."

But the blood was useful, because it was identified as being Tim's. Chief Inspector Willy Freedom came by later to tell Coffin. It so happened that Stella was there too, having a cup of coffee with her husband, which made the chief inspector a happy man. He always felt happy to see Stella, and with her husband there as a chaperone he felt safe. Left alone with her . . . well, he might have tried something.

Stella knew about the blood and wanted to talk about it.

"It was Tim's blood group."

She felt a bit sick. "But other people could have that same group . . ."

"Oh sure, but we had something else that made it certain that the knife has been used on the victim . . . there was a bit of his skin caught between the blade and the handle."

Not nice, Stella thought, giving a little shiver.

Willy did not add that a length of bloodied striped cotton had also been found nearby and that made him sure the killer had been a woman.

He did not suspect Stella, however, even silently, to himself. To suspect the boss's wife would not promote his career.

When Freedom had gone Coffin thought again about the dead man and that bunch of actors he had seen at the pub.

"It's good you were able to give us the identity of the victim right away," he said.

Stella nodded. "I'm glad I could help. All the murder cases I've been around with you, I'm usually just a passenger."

"No, you're never that, Stella. I always get support from you. Did you never understand that?" Then he stopped. "Mustn't go on like this or I shall be telling you how much I love you and not doing my proper work."

The police team soon concentrated their attention on the cast of the play that was being rehearsed.

"The only people the victim seemed to know were actors," said Inspector Mary Adams.

"I've noticed it's the way with actors . . . they just move from play to play."

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She did not say that she had come to the chief's office at this moment because his wife was an actress and must know all the performers her suspicions (and those too of Chief Inspector Freedom, of whom, as it happened, she was not a special admirer) had settled upon.

She ran over the names in case Coffin had forgotten.

Bob Taylor, Adam Makin, Jany Blanchard, and Virginia Gold.

Coffin accepted them politely, but he had remembered. It was one of Mary Adams's annoying tricks to remind you of what she thought you had forgotten but you had not.

Chief Inspector Freedom believed that the killer was a woman. A powerful stabber, though, some of those wounds had gone deep. Powerful and in a killing anger. He was keeping to himself for the moment not only this but the fact that on the blade of the knife was a stamped local address:

H. E. Willis, Cardoman Street, Second City.

He meant to go there. Cardoman Street, long and winding, with old shops and houses. It was not the smartest street in the Second City, although it was turning that way as the value of some of the old buildings began to be recognised.

It was late afternoon by the time the chief inspector got to Cardoman Street; he had planned it that way. He didn't think of it as the end of his working day, because his working day never ended. He chose the time because the shop was more likely to be empty at that time of day. He took a young detective constable, Sarah Jones, with him. Sarah's father was a well-known MP, and this was no bad thing for Willy to get close to.

Coffin noticed, but he did not think Willy did, that there was an amused glint in Sarah's eyes whenever her father's name came up with Willy. And he did get it in quite often.

The shop was little and dark, but crammed with saleable objects. Even Willy, not given to imaginative bursts, felt that if it were a bit bigger he wouldn't have been surprised to see a battleship in a corner.

There was an H. Willis, but that the chief inspector knew. It was the sort of thing he checked before setting out.

Harry Willis, aged 52, married with two sons. The Willis family obviously had good fecundity and would go on through the future as it had done in the past. The quiet lady in the corner of the shop must be Mrs. Willis.

Harry Willis looked at the knife and admitted he had sold it to a lady. A very quiet-spoken lady. . . . No, she had been wearing big dark spectacles, so it was hard to see her features. . . . Yes, he might know her again, couldn't be sure.

The chief inspector ground his teeth.

"But the interesting thing, strange really, don't you think so, dear," and he looked towards his wife, "she bought two knives."

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Coffin was summoned by Stella. She was usually careful not to presume on her position as his wife but sometimes, as now, it seemed important that he come home.

When she summoned, he obeyed.

Sitting on the sofa behind Stella, who was standing up holding her dog, was a woman he recognised as Jany Blanchard.

She stood up and held out a knife.

"I have come to confess." With dignity and clarity she said: "I was going to kill myself, but I find I cannot. But I think I killed Tim. Motive: love and hate."

A well-written piece of dialogue, Coffin thought, but all the same, Chief Inspector Freedom was in charge of this case and by him she would be arrested.

No favouritism here.

Then he looked at the knife.

It was not a pair to the knife that had stabbed and killed Tim. He shook his head. Not a confession he would accept.

"I don't believe you," he said bluntly.

Jany Blanchard burst into tears.

"Come on, Jany."

"I wanted to kill him. I felt as though I had. I wanted to confess. I loved him and I was so jealous."

Coffin shook his head.

Coffin found himself having to deal with Inspector Mary Adams next.

"We are looking for Bert Illiffe, but so far he's not been found."

Coffin had his own idea about Bert Illiffe. He had learnt that Bert (a shifty fellow to Coffin's mind) had had an offer to produce a very interesting little play in Paris, provided he got there fast. And he also knew that Bert had a lover in Paris. He thought Bert was there now and would eventually let them know. If and when it suited him.

Coffin enjoyed the thought of deflating Mary a fraction—not too far, since he had appointed her and thought she was clever. "He's probably performing somewhere under another name. Most of these people have a pseudonym or two . . . it's a commercial matter."

"He's not the only one," said Mary sadly. "I've got one chap, he's a forger, and he's got sixty names that I know of. I've no doubt he's got one or two others past me."

"You seem to have got his measure, though," said Coffin, glad to show appreciation. He knew she'd had an offer from a commercial company to set up her own private-investigation outfit. The money would be good, and he couldn't blame her for considering it.

"Oh yes, he got ten years, but he won't serve all that, and I have no doubt that he is somehow managing to carry on his business

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where he is. . . . The place he is serving time in now is so modern that I expect he thought he could get away with—"

"Murder?"

"No, not murder," said Inspector Adams. "Several chaps in there for that . . . but he might think he could carry on business when it suited him. I expect he has done. . . . Just my knowledge of what he is like . . . no proof though."

When Adams had gone, Coffin settled down to his work.

No progress on this murder, and no more on the du Croy murder, either.

Two murders, thought Coffin morosely. One a death for which an actress claimed responsibility but was lying, and the du Croy murder, with no one wanting to confess.

Usually he could make a good guess at the killer or killers. But not this time.

"I want a *proper* confession," he told himself.

He telephoned Stella, who turned out to be busy and not anxious to talk.

"I'm going to retire and take you off round the world."

"And I'm not coming," said Stella. "I have a TV series coming up."

Coffin told himself it was only what he had expected.

His secretary (very few people had secretaries these days since computers were so much less trouble) knocked on the door. Top policemen needed protection.

"What is it, Nell?" Eleanor Boyce had worked for him for several years.

"A lady to see you."

"Keep her away."

"I think you would like to see her."

She was a tall, well-groomed woman of middle age. Around her neck and drooping onto her ample breast she wore a triple row of beautiful pearls. He found himself not sure if Miss Boyce was pointing him towards his visitor's breasts or her pearls. Nell Boyce was capable of making this sort of underhand joke.

He stood up politely as the visitor came into the room. She was, somehow, the sort of woman you did stand up for. He felt as though he knew her face, which was unlined, and her body was that of a younger woman.

"Have we met?"

"I am Madame du Croy."

With hesitation Coffin said, "Du Croy's *wife?* There's a Comtesse du Croy?"

"Just one of his lies. He was not a count. No high aristocratic birth at all. I have come to confess to his killing. A woman may

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murder her husband—it is almost allowable—but I want justice, so I came to confess to you."

Inside himself Coffin was muttering: Just another lying woman wanting to confess to a murder she did not do. It's my day for madwomen.

"I bought two knives, but when it came to it I found his throat was nearer. I squeezed it, and he thought I was loving him, but of course, I was killing him."

Coffin felt cold: *He was strangled,* he thought, *so perhaps she isn't lying.*

She threw the knife onto his desk.

"Enough is enough is enough. When I found his latest lover was this young actor, I felt he should suffer, too—as I had. So I stabbed him. After I killed my husband."

Husbands can beat, stab, violate their wives, but in the end they seldom finish it, Coffin thought. *Wives do.*

"I've heard good reports on you, sir, so I throw myself on your mercy."

Coffin rose to pick up the knife, wrapping it in a tissue. *My mercy*, he thought, *we'll see about that.*

"We will need a formal confession," he said as he started the winding up of the two latest murders.

What a terrible thing sexual jealousy is, he thought. And then, with some gloom, *And what a lot of trouble it gives the police. I suppose King Arthur had that worry—but thank goodness I don't. I may be King Arthur, but I have no real worries over my Guinevere. On stage or off.* ●

Blog Bytes **(continued from p.11)** The others are Gerald So, Graham Powell, John Rickards, and Steven Torres. The reviews are of stories from this magazine (naturally), *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and various anthologies. It's a good place to compare your opinions with those of others and maybe to discover a new writer or a story you might otherwise have overlooked.

Crimespace (**http://crimespace.ning.com/**) isn't a blog. It's a website that bills itself as "A place for readers and writers of crime fiction to schmooze, booze, and draw up plans for the heist to end all heists. Find new authors to delve into and discuss the latest in crime fiction. Share photos, videos, and make some friends." Overseen by Daniel Hatadi, it's a social network, sort of like *MySpace* for crime-fiction writers and fans, which means you have to join before you take part. If you do decide to join, you can create your own page, upload photos and music, participate in the discussion forums, and more.

Bill Crider's own blog, Bill Crider's Pop Culture Magazine, can be found at **http://billcrider.blogspot.com**.

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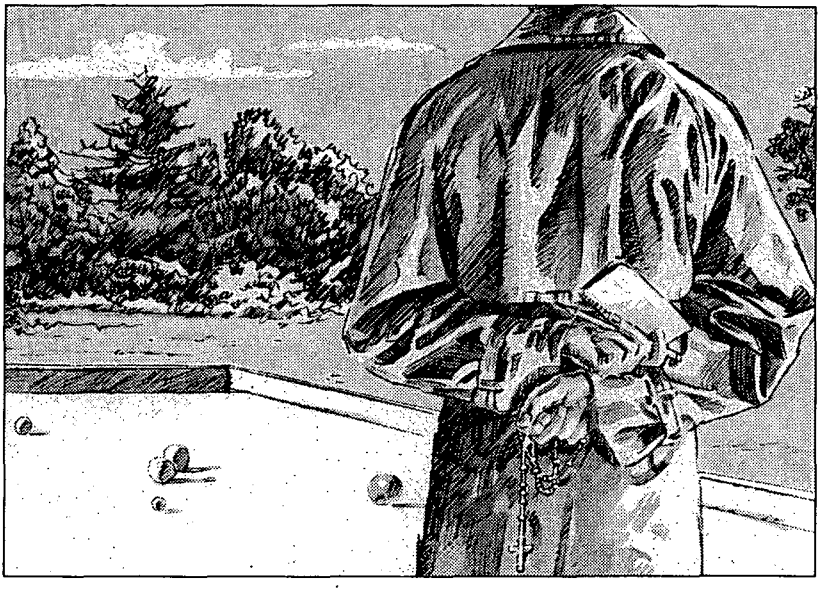

Art by Ron Buccalo

The Judas Clue

by Terence Faherty

1.

Bocce is a game played with wooden balls, nine of them, eight the size of softballs and one a little bigger than a golf ball. The big ones give the game its name. The little one, the target, is called the pallino. Bocce is played on a flat lawn or court with side walls and backboards. The teams post representatives on both ends of this court. The winner of a coin flip tosses the pallino anywhere on the court beyond the center line, and the players from the same end try to roll their bocce balls as close to it as they can. Then the players on the other end of the court start the business all over again.

At the courts where I played in Boston in the 'seventies, the players were usually retired Italian men built low to the ground, but there were exceptions. Like Owen Keane, a skinny Irish guy in his late twenties and only semiretired. That was me. Another exception was my boss, Tessa Tesauro, a sturdy brunette in her forties who was very unretired. Tessa had inherited her membership in the Holy Angels Bocce Society from her grandfather, though she'd been an honorary member in her own right ever since she'd started tagging

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along behind him around age five.

When Tessa's husband had been killed in a holdup at the liquor store they owned and she'd decided to run the business herself, the Bocce Society had become her principal source of advice and support. At least, that was her excuse for never missing a Wednesday afternoon at the courts when the weather was nice. My excuse for accompanying her when asked was that she was an indulgent employer and deserved to be indulged herself. Plus, bocce was a sport that could be played with a beer in one hand.

Called a "metaphysical detective" by the *New York Times*, Terence Faherty's Owen Keane is a compulsive solver of mysteries. The following tale is from the "lost years" Keane spent in Boston after dropping out of the seminary. Readers can piece together more of Keane's career from the several novels Mr. Faherty has written about him, and from the story collection *The Confessions of Owen Keane* (Crippen & Landru).

One Wednesday in June we played a practice match with two brothers, Enzo and Emilio. Bocce is usually played by two teams of four, so it can get a little crowded at each end of the court. Teams of two give you more elbow room. And more privacy for the business chats Tessa liked to have. I usually watched those from the other end of the court, but on this particular day, Tessa chose Enzo as her teammate and pulled me behind her to the shadier end of the pitch.

I quickly reviewed my recent performance at McNab's, Tessa's store, where I stocked shelves, made deliveries, and sometimes clerked. I fulfilled those duties with a certain lack of interest, as I imagined most shelf-stocking, delivery-making liquor-store clerks did, but, as far as I could recall, my recent daydreaming had been no worse than usual.

That left another, more ominous possibility. Once, a year or so earlier, Tessa had tried to interest me in her daughter, Grizzella, an operator for New England Bell. That had been a nice compliment, since I was no obvious catch. True, I had graduated with honors from nearby Boston College. But then I'd dropped out of a Midwestern seminary where I'd gone to study for the priesthood. Dropped out or been pushed, depending on who was telling the story. Following that, I'd spent the middle years of a perfectly good decade underachieving at everything except drinking beer and reading detective stories.

Compliment or not, I'd passed on Grizzella's hand. Tessa had been hard to convince, and I was afraid, as Enzo and Emilio threw their last balls of the first frame, that I'd have to do the job all over

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again. Tessa's opening remark told me otherwise.

"You've heard me talk about my poor cousin Dolly."

That was it for the moment, but it was enough. Cousin Dolly, last name Vasti, was a murder victim, a recent one. She'd died of a blow to the head, probably delivered by her husband Frank. I'd seen a photo of the victim—dark and attractive—in the paper and overheard Tessa discussing the case with consoling friends who'd dropped by the store. Now Tessa wanted to discuss it with me. I found myself wishing that she'd come up with another daughter for me to date. Listening to gossip was one thing, getting involved another.

"They've arrested Frank," Tessa said as she tossed the pallino down court, tucking it into one corner, as she liked to do. "But I don't know."

Frank Vasti had been the only suspect mentioned in the *Boston Globe*'s brief account of the crime. Dolly, bleeding from a head wound, had been found wandering the hallway outside the couple's apartment by a neighbor. She'd been incoherent, and the neighbor had called for an ambulance. Its attendants had guessed that Dolly was also bleeding inside her skull, but there'd been nothing they could do for that except hurry her to the hospital. She'd died on the way without revealing the name of her attacker. She had said something, though. The newspaper accounts hadn't mentioned it, but no visitor to McNab's had failed to. According to these authorities, she'd muttered a phrase several times: "the sin of Judas."

Tessa repeated the words now, also muttering. "Frank was cheating on her, with a woman named Camaselli. Dolly proved that herself. Or that detective she hired to follow Frank proved it, that Maniman guy. So maybe Dolly solved her own murder. Only I don't know."

I took a cold can of Budweiser from the cooler I'd placed behind the backboard, popped the top, and dropped the pull tab into the can.

"You're going to swallow one of those someday," Tessa said, as she always did. "Not to mention it's unsanitary. Your turn."

I rolled a ball down the turf, finding bounces that shouldn't have been there and getting a glower from my partner, Emilio. I decided I'd have to use guile to hold up my end of the match, though I'd rather have dropped the Dolly Vasti subject entirely.

I waited until Tessa was lining up her shot and asked, "You don't think Frank did it?"

"No," she said, the ball frozen on her fingertips. "I've known him since grammar school. He and Dolly and I went to the same one. Same high school, too. All us girls were after him then, I remember. What I can't remember is him ever hitting anyone. He was a hound, okay, but he never raised a hand to Dolly."

"Maybe he was saving it up," I said as her roll smacked the back-

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board without hitting another ball first, scratching the attempt. "And there was a handkerchief, right? The Camaselli woman's."

The murder weapon, a heavy ceramic bookend shaped like a dog, had been partially wiped of blood with it. The piece of cloth held the mistress's initials, AC, and she had identified it herself. It would have made Camaselli the prime suspect if she hadn't had a great alibi. She'd been undergoing an IRS audit the morning Dolly Vasti was attacked.

"It was Frank's apartment, too," Tessa said. "So he had one of the tramp's handkerchiefs stashed away and the murderer found it. That's not impossible."

Just unlikely in the extreme. "What about the Judas clue?"

"That could have meant nothing. Her skull was fractured, and she was babbling. Or she could have meant someone else."

I waited, expecting her to share a name. The women who'd visited the store had always ended their discussions in whispers that had defeated my best eavesdropping.

Tessa stayed silent through two more frames, until I started to think she didn't have a name to share. Then she blurted out, "How about somebody from your old tribe? A priest. I'm not telling you this just to spread tales, Owen, but there's a priest at Dolly's parish, St. James. A Father Mullins. He's been accused of doing something horrible to a little girl, something the parish wanted to sweep under the rug. The little girl's mother might have let them—she's a mouse, that one—but not Dolly. She was ready to raise holy hell right up to the Vatican."

"You think 'the sin of Judas' might have meant Father Mullins?"

"Why not? Can you think of a betrayal greater than a priest harming a child? And a priest is an apostle, like Judas, right?"

Something about the whole Judas business bothered me, but I couldn't say why. "I guess," I admitted.

"So listen, Owen. Here's the thing. I want you to look into this. As a favor. Dolly was more than a cousin to me. Not a sister, maybe, but close. I want to know what happened to her. I want justice done. You're the perfect man for the job. You've done some investigating, right?"

So I'd intimated more than once, when I'd been drinking or when someone had kidded me too hard about being a delivery boy with a four-year degree. I'd hinted at a more accomplished past as an amateur sleuth, for which I now felt like kicking myself.

"And you were in the seminary. You're practically in the club. You'll know who to talk to about Father Mullins and how to talk to them. The police are afraid to ruffle those peacock feathers."

I could have pointed out that being a seminary dropout had barred me from that club forever. I could have offered more details on my past investigations, several of which had blown up in my face. But I didn't win many arguments with Tessa. And before I

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could say anything, she added a deal clincher, timing it to coincide with her best roll of the match, one that came to rest kissing the pallino.

"I'll pay you. You'll be on the clock, like you were working in the store. And what's that they say on private eye shows? Oh, yeah. Plus expenses."

2.

I started late the next morning with Seamus Maniman, the private detective who had been working for Dolly Vasti. I was actually looking forward to the interview, not because I expected him to extend me any courtesies, professional or otherwise, but because I couldn't pass up the chance to meet a real P.I., having spent so much of my recent life with fictional ones. And Maniman could sort the facts of the case from the whispers.

So I called Maniman Investigations and offered to buy the proprietor a drink, saying that I was a friend of a friend of Dolly's and interested in writing about the case. The detective, who'd answered his phone himself, changed the invitation to coffee and a donut and named a cafe off Kenmore Square.

Boston was taking the 'seventies on the chin, it seemed to me. Its latest attempt to update its skyline, the John Hancock Tower, was still popping out blue glass panes when pedestrians least expected it. The panels were temporarily replaced with wooden sheets, giving the tower its local nickname: the world's tallest plywood building. And Boston's college-student population, which was enormous, was still spray-painting the town with peace symbols—despite the war being over—and papering it with handbills for concerts and plays and lectures on the cause of the moment. Kenmore Square was especially hard hit by these and looked to me that day like a bulletin board with sidewalks.

I arrived at the cafe early, having had luck with the Green Line for once, but Maniman was there waiting for me, overfilling his side of a window booth. He wasn't fat exactly, but he was big. His square face was red and moist, as though the tabletop pressing his midsection was cutting off his circulation. But his expression was friendly, especially around the ice-blue eyes, small for the face and crinkled with what I thought was amusement.

He might have been reacting to my outfit. To my usual well-worn oxford shirt and jeans, I'd added a linen jacket that went with my cover story, I hoped. Maniman's olive wash-and-wear suit was exactly the thing I imagined Lew Archer, my favorite paperback P.I., might wear. Archer's would be neatly pressed, too, like Maniman's. As the waitress brought my coffee and refilled my guest's, I made a mental note to pick a suit like that myself, if I ever got a Christmas bonus.

Maniman hadn't ordered a donut, evidently preferring a cigarette,

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unfiltered. I dug out one of my extra-filtered ones, being between attempts to quit. The detective offered me his lighter, an old Zippo like the one I'd once carried, and watched with amusement as I used it one-handed.

"So you're a writer?" he asked for openers.

"A would-be writer," I said, waving my pen above the notepad that completed my clever disguise. "I'm a liquor-store clerk, but I don't want to be one forever." So Tessa kept telling me.

"How'd you pick up on the Vasti murder? Friend of a friend, you said on the phone."

I told him that I'd overheard the case being discussed at McNab's, and he nodded like he knew the place. Everyone in the area knew McNab's.

"What makes it worth writing about? Guy cracks his wife on the head, that's 'dog bites man.'"

He looked down as he said it, the amusement gone from his eyes. Though he was no older than Tessa, his brown hair was thinning, the regular lines left by his comb looking like furrows in a dying field.

"There's the priest angle," I said. "A killer priest would be 'man bites the leg off a dog.'"

"I don't know much about that," Maniman said with a shrug. "Mrs. Vasti never mentioned it. The cop who grilled me did. Hardcase name of Craney."

I almost dropped my cigarette. Maniman didn't seem to notice.

"I think Craney just brought it up so he could say he had," the detective added. "Woman's husband's stepping out on her, she has the proof, she intends to divorce him, she ends up dead. It hangs together all by itself. You don't need to drag in the clergy."

"So he really was cheating on her?"

"Not doubt one. Twice a week every week with a woman over in Newton name of Camaselli. Angela Camaselli. I trailed him to her house and the two of them to the kind of restaurants where the lighting's not so good. Got pictures, the works. Gave it all to Mrs. Vasti."

And now seemed sorry he had. That was understandable, given how things had worked out. "Is that a lot of your business?" I asked.

"It's a lot of any private investigator's business."

Not in the books I read. My current paperback was *The Barbarous Coast*, by Ross Macdonald. In it, Macdonald had used a phrase that was haunting me: "an onion taste of grief." I was still trying to wash that taste out of my mouth, years after I'd failed in the seminary. Maniman seemed to have his own onion taste to deal with, and the coffee he was sipping wasn't doing the job. He looked toward the cafe's door, and I hurried us back to the subject.

"Why would Frank Vasti care about being divorced? Isn't that what he wanted?"

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"Another old story. Mrs. Vasti had the big money—legacy from her old man—and he had none. He wasn't going to walk away with any in a divorce, either. The divorce news must have hit him like a sock full of wet sand. He'd been sweet-talking Dolly—Mrs. Vasti—since high school. But this time, she'd had enough. I'm not saying he planned it out. He couldn't have, not leaving the handkerchief that way. But he did it."

"Did she confront him with the handkerchief?"

"Maybe. He claims he never saw it before. Mrs. Vasti didn't get it from me; I never got that close to the Camaselli dame. She could have found it among her husband's things. Or he could have had it in his pocket and taken it out when he tried to clean that bookend. People do stupid things when the hot blood takes over. But killing in a fit of rage is still murder. The cops have the right guy for once. Dolly fingered him before she died. The betrayer."

Maniman started to slide his bulk out of the booth. I said, "What's the rest of Vasti's story?"

"Ask him," Maniman said, and left me.

3.

Getting in to see Frank Vasti would have been complicated and maybe impossible. Luckily, Maniman had given me another lead. I knew the cop he'd mentioned, the hardcase named Craney. I'd met him when I'd been an undergraduate, when he'd been investigating the death of a nurse and I'd been a suspect, along with most of the men in my dorm. Craney had somehow found out that I liked to play detective. He'd tried to turn me into his campus spy, which hadn't worked out for him. All that was years in the past, but my heart rate still spiked when I thought about the time I'd spent in his interrogation room. I told myself that I'd be doing the questioning this time and boarded the inbound trolley.

Craney, now a lieutenant, remembered me. My name alone got me in to see him at the old headquarters building on Berkeley Street. And his first words to me were, "Come to confess to the Knaff killing?"

Knaff was the murdered nurse, and the case was still open, as I very well knew. "No," I said, my false confidence running for the exit. "I've come about Dolly Vasti. Not to confess," I added so hastily that even the hardcase cop had to smile. "To ask about it."

"Still think you're Sherlock Holmes?"

"Bernstein and Woodward," I said, holding up my reporter's notepad and forcing a smile. "I thought I might be able to sell a freelance article about it."

The policeman gave me a long look. "Your selling needs work," he said. But he added, "Have a seat."

Craney wasn't a tall man but he sat like one, his Popeye forearms folded on the desk in front of him. He wore eyeglasses I didn't

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remember from the 'sixties and his hair, formerly very slick, was now almost dry. The wet head really was dead if Craney had wrung his out.

"What do you want to know, kid?" he asked.

"Anything about the business you don't like?"

"I'm not crazy about the victim getting up and wandering around after the murderer left her for dead, but I've known cases where that's happened with blunt force trauma to the head."

So had I. *The Kennel Murder Case* by S.S. Van Dine came to mind, but I decided not to mention it. "What's Frank Vasti's story?"

"Doesn't have one, not worth telling. Heard about the attack from the little-old-lady neighbor who called for the ambulance. By the time he got to the hospital, his wife was dead."

"Where was he during the attack?"

"On his way to the beach at Revere, alone, to think things out. He claimed he turned around and came back before he got there. No witnesses to any of that, of course."

"What did he say about Angela Camaselli?"

"He admitted to the affair. Couldn't very well deny it, not with the records that ex-cop Mrs. Vasti hired kept. But he claimed to be surprised that his wife knew. She'd never gotten around to confronting him, he says."

"Did he admit to having the handkerchief?"

"Nope. Said he never saw it before. Luckily, he didn't have time to put Angela wise. She admitted it was hers. We got her to show us a matching one, so she can't have second thoughts on the witness stand."

"It doesn't bother you that the handkerchief is too pat?" It bothered me. For one thing, I was getting tired of writing the word in my phony notebook. "There was plenty of blood around. If he wanted to sign his name to the crime, he could have used that."

The policeman was staring at me again, maybe thinking back longingly to the days when I fainted every time I saw him. "Got a better theory?" he finally asked.

"I've heard that Dolly Vasti was making things hot for a priest named Mullins, who may or may not have done something to a little girl in his parish."

Craney was impressed. "We heard that, too. But we didn't get very far with it. Father Mullins is on administrative leave at some retreat house down in Duxbury. Not available for questioning, according to the archdiocese."

"How loudly did you ask?"

"Not very. Mullins's boss—and I don't mean God—talked to my captain's boss. We have Vasti pretty much dead to rights, so we haven't pushed it. The Church people claim to be investigating the abuse allegation themselves. I met their investigator—they call him an inquisitor, believe it or not—priest name of Walsh."

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He poked around on his cluttered desktop, found a business card, and dealt it to me. "I'd hate to think of you bothering that guy," he said suggestively.

I pocketed the card and thanked him for his time.

"You owe me a murderer from way back," Craney reminded me when I reached the office door. "I'd settle for knowing we're right about Frank Vasti."

4.

I might have headed straight to Duxbury and a chat with Father Mullins, but my usually trusty Volkswagen Karmann Ghia had thrown a rod and I was still saving up for a new, secondhand engine. So I went to see the archdiocese's inquisitor instead, Father Colin Walsh. I called first, from a pay phone at police headquarters that must have handled its share of interesting calls. My call certainly merited that adjective. In fact, I thought it might be way too interesting to the passersby. So I gave the secretary who answered the inquisitor's number the barest summary: I wanted to talk to Walsh about a case of abuse concerning a local priest. That whispered fragment worked wonders. The secretary put me on hold for no more than two drags on a cigarette and then offered me an appointment for that very afternoon.

I was directed not to the chancellery, as I'd expected, but to an old church near Fenway Park, St. Ann's. I inquired for Father Walsh at its rectory, and the housekeeper told me he was in the garden.

"Saying his prayers," she added, her tone warning me not to interrupt.

Sure enough, in a narrow rose garden bordered by high brick walls, I found the priest pacing back and forth, breviary in hand. There was a bench just inside the garden's open gate, and I sat down, moving slowly, the air being full of bees.

The pacing priest was younger than I'd expected—no more than thirty—but he wore the long black cassock I remembered priests wearing when I was a boy. It accentuated his height and his thinness, a trait we shared. We also had long noses in common, his slightly beaked. His skin was very pale and his short, curly hair a surprisingly vivid red.

Inevitably as I sat there, I pictured myself in a cassock—or at least in black—pacing a garden like this one, reciting ancient prayers. Not a loner anymore but a member of a huge organization. Perhaps an official investigator, even, and not a very unofficial "overturner of stones," as a friend had once dubbed me. Father Walsh saved me from those useless thoughts by closing his prayer book and joining me on the bench.

"Theresa at the office called to say you were coming," he said, speaking with a soft Irish brogue, a not uncommon accent in Boston. He sat very close and peered into my eyes as though I'd

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complained about a cinder. I did my best not to blink.

"This happened when? When you were an altar boy perhaps?"

"Excuse me?"

"And what parish? Don't be embarrassed. It's hard to talk about it, I know, but you must."

"I think there's been a mistake," I said, up to speed at last. "Nothing like that's happened to me."

The expression of concern on the priest's long face eased briefly and then darkened again as I added, "I'm here to talk about the accusation against Father Mullins."

"Are you a reporter?"

"No," I said, happy to be done with that disguise at last. "My name is Owen Keane. I'm working for Tessa Tesauro, Dolly Vasti's cousin. She's not sure the police arrested the right man for Mrs. Vasti's murder."

I thought Father Walsh might make me go through the formality of explaining who Dolly Vasti was, a formality because he had to know all about her death if he'd met Lieutenant Craney. I was drawing breath to connect the dots for him when he spoke up.

"I think the police are settled in their minds as far as Father Mullins is concerned."

"Not the one I talked with. He mentioned meeting up with one of these." I reached back and tapped the brick wall behind my head.

"You can understand our trying to avoid a scandal if we can. You're a Catholic yourself, Owen?"

It was my chance to trot out my credentials, the ones Tessa considered gilt-edged. I considered them guilt-edged, and I hadn't planned to share them. But I heard myself say, "I spent a year at St. Aelred's Seminary."

"In Indiana? A good school that. Only a year? What happened?"

"I ran into questions they couldn't answer." Fell into them, I sometimes thought. Fell and kept falling.

My hands were gripping the bench on either side of my knees. Father Walsh patted the hand nearest him.

"Some questions are unanswerable," he said, "difficult as that fact is to face. We'll talk no more of it now. As for Dolly Vasti, you've probably known Catholics like her. I met with her, you know, more than once, and I felt like I knew her from the first. A good Catholic but an old-fashioned one. Thought Vatican Two was the worst thing that had happened to the Church since Luther. She had problems with Father Mullins from the very day he arrived at St. James. He's what you Americans call a lefty. It was inevitable that those two would knock heads, even if the unfortunate business I'm investigating had never been mentioned."

"How is your investigation going?"

"It wouldn't be proper for me to say. Or for any word of it to get about in connection with poor Mrs. Vasti's death. Father Mullins

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was in Duxbury when that terrible thing happened, and he was sincerely sorry to hear of it, thorn in his side though Mrs. Vasti was. Old-fashioned she might have been, but she was a true daughter of the Church."

I'd been slow to absorb his basic message, focused as I was on accusations and alibis. Then suddenly it broke through. I stood up, almost involuntarily.

"Thank you for your help, Father," I said.

"Have I been any then?" the priest asked, surprised.

"I think so."

5.

I'd been given conflicting information on one point of the Dolly Vasti story. Maniman had told me that she was planning to divorce—and impoverish—her husband. The private eye had even speculated that the divorce announcement had caused Frank Vasti to snap and murder his wife. But Vasti had told the police that he'd had no idea his wife had found out about his affair, which meant she couldn't have threatened to divorce him over it.

I hadn't considered that discrepancy to be very important. Vasti, fighting for his life, would naturally deny that he and his wife had discussed divorce, since he was also denying that a fatal confrontation had taken place. Now Father Walsh's portrait of Dolly had brought the divorce business to the top of my list of questions to be resolved. If Dolly had been a strict, Pre-Vatican II Catholic, how could she have been planning a divorce? The Church, changed beyond recognition in some areas, still wouldn't recognize divorce, though more and more Catholics were ending their marriages.

Father Walsh might have painted Dolly's nose an especially bright blue to explain away her antagonism toward the liberal Mullins. Or the shock of her husband's infidelity might have caused Dolly to jump the rails spiritually. Or what? I thought my employer might be able to clear up the point, and I headed for McNab's on Beacon Street as fast as public transportation could carry me.

Tessa wasn't there. The man in charge, a lifer named Gibby, said she was helping a niece get ready for graduation. He didn't know the niece's name or phone number, so I was stuck.

Then I thought of another person I could ask about Dolly, someone who had never seen her, probably, but was likely to be an authority on the subject of Dolly and divorce: Angela Camaselli, the other woman. She lived in Newton, according to Maniman. That town wasn't very far away, but it wasn't served by a trolley line. After looking for and finding Camaselli's address in the store's phone book, I grabbed the keys to McNab's delivery vehicle, a rusting Rambler sedan, and headed out. When Gibby protested about my use of the car, I told him to address his complaints to Tessa.

Camaselli lived in an apartment complex just off Commonwealth

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Avenue, a sprawling place with the grandiloquent name Versailles Villas. It was late enough for tired office workers to be dragging themselves home, and I had to fight for my parking space.

Angela Camaselli had just gotten home herself. Or so I deduced from her attire, a dark purple skirt and a light purple blouse, half untucked, and from the fact that she'd lost her shoes but not her hose. A second possibility, that she was entertaining yet another straying husband, I eliminated due to her worn makeup and the unromantic atmosphere. In the living room beyond her metal front door, which I was not invited to enter, a television was blaring the evening news.

"What do you want?" she asked, running the words together in her disinterest. She was young, even by my standards, but her bloom was currently wilted. Her blond hair was as dull as Christmas manger straw, and her big, almost violet eyes were half closed.

I told her the same true story I'd told Father Walsh, but she was less ready to accept it. I thought the problem might be me, that she knew a moonlighting delivery boy when she saw one. Then she said, "Why would Dolly's cousin want to help Frank?"

"They go back to grammar school," I said. "But I don't think she wants to help him as much as she wants to get the real killer."

"It wasn't Frank. He couldn't hurt anybody, especially Dolly. He was afraid of her. We'd be together now if he'd been able to walk out on her."

"Suppose she wouldn't give him a divorce?" I said, getting us to the point of my visit.

"Suppose?" Camaselli asked. She laughed, sounding less sincere than the newscaster behind her. "She never would have. Never. We knew that. She was a lay nun, practically. But you can't keep a man chained to you these days. It's not the 'fifties. We knew we'd have to force a divorce on her. We'd have done it by now, only Frank couldn't tell her."

"Because of her money?"

"No. He didn't care about that. But he didn't want to hurt her. So what about hurting me? I cried my eyes out that last night, the night before she was killed. Embarrassed Frank because the waitress could hear me."

"You were in a restaurant?"

"Yeah, over in Weston."

"Did you use your own handkerchief to dry your eyes?"

"Yeah."

"Any chance you left it behind?"

Those violet eyes were perfectly dry now. And fully open. "I didn't miss it until the police said they'd found one. I didn't tell them about leaving it in the restaurant. I was afraid Frank had picked it up."

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"Not him," I said, and thanked her for her time.

6.

I took it easy driving back to Beacon Street, thinking things over as I went. One item on that agenda was the Judas clue. Something about that had bothered me from the start, some echo of grammar-school religion classes taught by patient nuns. Now the clue made perfect sense. Nearly everything did.

To knock the rough edges off one of the last pieces, I stopped at a pay phone near my old campus and tried to reach Lieutenant Craney. He was gone for the day, but that didn't bother me. In fact, it felt right. It would be better to call him in the morning, after I'd had a chance to talk to Tessa.

She was back from her graduation errand and in her usual place of honor behind the chest-high counter. As soon as I walked in, she told Gibby to call it a day. Something about my expression had told her that I wanted to chat.

Once we were alone, she said, "You've learned something."

"Nearly everything," I said. "You can tell me the rest."

"Me?" Tessa slammed shut the cash drawer she'd been counting down. "What can I tell you?"

"Why did Dolly hire Seamus Maniman?"

"She thought Frank was up to something. She—"

"I mean, why Maniman? Why did she choose him?"

"Oh," Tessa said. "Dolly's known him forever. We were all in school together."

Maniman had told me that himself, but I hadn't picked up on it at the time. He'd said that Frank Vasti had been sweet-talking Dolly since high school. That was more background than Dolly would have shared with a P.I. He had to have known it already.

"Could he have been in love with her?"

Tessa's eyes went wide—with the enormity of the implication, I thought. Then the little bell over the store's front door tinkled and Seamus Maniman walked in. He looked even bigger than I remembered, and he was wearing gloves, as threatening a sight to me on that hot June day as a drawn gun.

He turned the door's deadbolt before addressing me: "You've figured it all out, haven't you?"

Tessa ignored the interruption and answered my last question, though I would have been just as happy if she'd waited a day or two. "This one was always mooning after Dolly in the old days. She'd never have anything to do with him."

"Not till she needed me to tail a cheating husband," Maniman said.

"Not even then," I said. There was no point in holding back if Tessa wouldn't. "Not the way you wanted her to. You handed her Vasti's head on a plate, all the proof she needed to be rid of him

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forever. You even had a handkerchief the other woman had left in a restaurant. You thought you had it all at last. Dolly and her money. Then she told you no. How did that feel? Like a sock full of wet sand?"

That was pushing him hard, especially given that, for my theory to be right, Maniman had to have a temper. But I wanted his eyes on me just then and not on Tessa.

It worked. Maniman took a step my way and then reined himself in. "Who'd you call just now from that phone booth on Commonwealth?" he rasped.

"How did you know about that?"

"I've been following you since Kenmore Square, kid. I watched you work it out, stop by stop."

"I never saw you."

"You never even looked. Innocent people never do. Frank Vasti had his head on a swivel, the weasel, and he still never spotted me. So who'd you call?"

"Lieutenant Craney, to tell him about you."

"I don't think so. You weren't on long enough. I think you didn't get him. Maybe you called to tell him about me or maybe to ask him why I'd left the force. I was kicked off. For leaning too hard on a suspect."

That was exactly the information I'd been after, but I stuck to my story. "Craney's on his way here right now."

"Nice try, kid. But you can't bluff without cards in your hand. Anyway, I'll have to take the chance."

He started to reach inside his coat.

Tessa said, "Don't move, Seamus."

Ever since her husband had died in that holdup, Tessa had been a believer in the right to bear arms. She kept a shotgun, cut down, behind the high counter. It would fire right through the partition's thin paneling in an emergency, but that wouldn't be necessary now. She had it raised to her shoulder and pointed at Maniman's broad stomach.

"I'll cut you in half if you move, I swear I will. I'll do it for Dolly. Owen, call the police."

7.

The following Wednesday I was once again the guest of the Holy Angels Bocce Society. The afternoon off was a little bonus from Tessa for getting Dolly's killer. As a further reward, she'd taken me as her partner in the practice match. Or maybe that was a reward for Enzo and Emilio, our opponents, who were beating the pants off us, so to speak.

The game was interrupted by the arrival of a tall, thin man in black, Father Colin Walsh. He beckoned me over to an idle court, and Tessa nodded her release, maybe thinking she'd do as well

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without me. I handed my beer to Enzo and walked over.

"You visited me in my garden, and here I am in yours," the priest said in greeting.

"How did you find me?"

"The man at the store knew where you'd be. McNab's."

That raised the question of how Walsh had found McNab's. He didn't make me ask it.

"I was speaking to a friend of yours on the police force, a Lieutenant Craney. He was nice enough to let me know that Father Mullins has nothing more to fear in the matter of Dolly Vasti's death. He told me where you worked. I thought I'd come by to thank you myself."

As far as I could see, I'd done nothing for Fathers Mullins and Walsh that required a thank you in person. Some other errand had brought the priest, something he'd tell me about when he was ready.

"You did a fine job," Walsh added, "speaking as one inquisitor to another. What made you first suspect Mr. Maniman?"

I told him the thing that should have been the first piece I placed and instead had been one of the last. "You may not have heard, but Dolly Vasti said something before she died. 'The sin of Judas.'"

"I'd not heard."

"The police thought she meant her husband's betrayal of her with another woman."

Walsh spotted the problem more quickly than I had. "But the sin of Judas, his damning sin, wasn't betrayal. It was despair. He despaired of God's forgiveness and so hanged himself. You think Dolly meant Mr. Maniman?"

"He despaired of ever having the woman he loved," I said.

"Despaired so hard he lashed out at her. And he's hanged himself, like Judas, only more slowly."

We listened to the distant rumble of traffic and the nearer clack of wooden balls. Father Walsh still seemed reluctant to tell me why he'd come, so I asked a question that had been worrying me.

"How big a problem is this sexual abuse by priests?"

The Irishman came out of his thoughts with a start. "There's only been the one complaint about Father Mullins."

"But there've been others, about other priests. When I showed up at your rectory, you assumed I was another victim. So did Theresa, your receptionist, when I called."

Father Walsh gave me a reappraising look, one I hadn't gotten in a while. "However big the problem is," he said carefully, "the archdiocese has it in hand. Justice will be done. You can depend on it."

It was clear to me that Walsh believed what he said. I wondered how well he understood the bureaucracy in which he was placing so much faith. In the end, I decided to trust him and his judgment. I thanked him for coming by, giving him one last chance to tell me

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why he'd made the trip.

He ran a hand through his red hair and said, "There's something I wanted to ask you, Owen. I've no idea what happened at that seminary out in Indiana and no real desire to know. But I did want to ask you whether you've ever thought of taking up your studies again."

"For the priesthood?"

"Exactly. The work grows every year, and the workers fall by the wayside. I could definitely use a man like you in the work I do, though I couldn't make you any promises there. What I could do is say a word to the archbishop on your behalf."

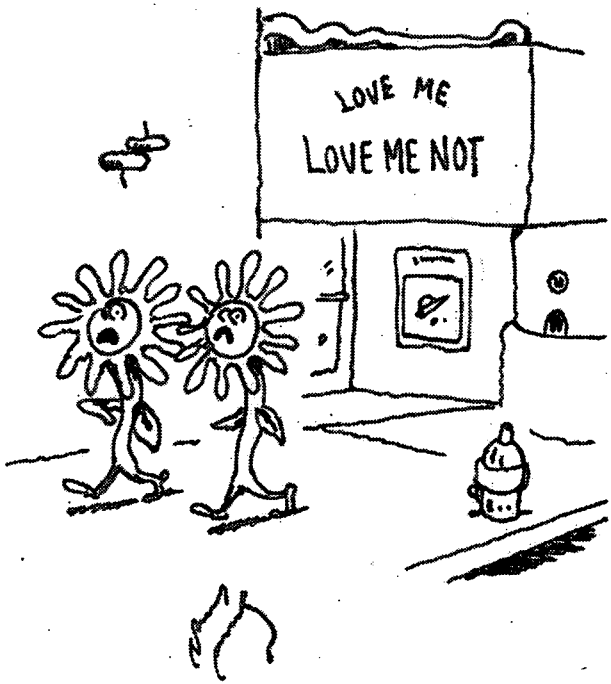
"Please don't trouble yourself," I said.

He sighed. "At least think about it. If not the priesthood, think about doing something else with your life, something more than you're doing now. This sin of Judas we've been discussing, the sin of despair, we can any of us fall into it. It can cut us off from the future as surely as it has poor Mr. Maniman."

"I'll think it over," I said.

"Good man. Maybe a private inquiry bureau would be the answer. Recent events have created a vacancy. The Owen Keane Detective Agency, you could call it. Your motto could be 'Unanswerable questions discreetly answered.' Good luck to you, Owen."

To both of us, I thought, and returned to my game. ●



"I've never been so scared in my life!"

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Art by Mark Evans

THE BEST REVENGE

by Brendan DuBois

When I got off shift, I decided to keep my uniform on. I've found that wearing the uniform means quicker service and answers to my questions at the hospice where Mom is staying. Part of the secret alliance between healthcare workers and cops; we both see the worst in people on a daily basis, and try to look out for each other as much as possible. Which is why a lot of cops are married to nurses. However, most nurses are still female, and I'm blissfully heterosexual and have yet to find a male member of the medical establishment that I can put up with for more than five or six months, much to Mom's dismay.

As I parked my car in the near-empty lot and walked up to the building, I thought again about that choice of words: *staying.* Nobody in that building was living. Living meant staying put, building a life, going on with things. At the Wentworth County Hospice, the residents were just waiting to go places, places that weren't talked about in polite company.

I nodded at the staff—all young and vibrant looking, like ambassadors from the land of Good Health—and made my way to my mom's room. There was a little cardboard sign on the door that

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said "Jacqueline Powers," though only lawyers and doctors ever called her Jacqueline. "It's Jackie, thank you very much." Her room's on the east side of the building and has a good view of Porter Harbor, the sole working harbor in the state of New Hampshire, and Mom turned and gave me a weak smile as I came into the room.

"Stephanie, so glad to see you," she said, stretched out on her bed, a small writing table across her lap, cards laid out in solitaire. Mom is seventy years old and most of her life has had bright red hair, which she has always been proud of and which she has passed on to her sole daughter and two sons. Today, what was left of that blazing mane was hidden by a light-blue scarf wrapped around her head. She had on a Porter Police Department sweatshirt, and on the nightstand next to her, her favorite bits of jewelry. As she's lost weight, the rings and bracelets have kept on slipping off and she won't put them away. She insists on keeping them in plain sight, even though I've warned her that her jewelry might get stolen.

When I had told her that, nearly a month ago, she had smiled sweetly and said, "The bastards wouldn't dare."

Knowing my mother, she was probably right.

"Hi, Mom," I said back to her, kissing her forehead, the first of several evidence-gathering ploys I've come to use. A cool and slightly moist forehead meant she was having a good day. Hot and dry meant a bad day. Today seemed to be a good day and I took one of the chairs in the room, looking for other bits of evidence, and there it was: In the small trash bin next to her bed were chocolate-bar wrappers. I felt a small tingle of encouragement. Mom has always been one for keeping secrets, from how she met my dad (now living with a male sculptor in Key West) to how she became interested in police work (she was the first female officer and detective in my own department in Porter) up to and including the present day and the malignancy that was raising merry hell with her innards.

"Don't you fret," she had said, and I had ignored, but even the doctors weren't much help in keeping me informed. I think she frightened them as well, for all I got from them was vaguely optimistic tales of radiation and chemo and future surgeries, if current trends continued in their course, blah blah blah.

I had given up fighting Mom over this; now she was residing at the hospice, where they bused her over once a day to the cancer center at the Porter hospital and then took her back, where she ate

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what she could and tried to keep up her strength during her bouts of nausea and vomiting, and where I tried to be the good daughter.

So today she dealt out her cards and said, "How was your shift today? Anything interesting?"

I shook my head. "A motor-vehicle accident in the morning, another in the afternoon, and I served two warrants, one for passing bad checks, the other for non-payment of child support. Was able to catch up on a lot of paperwork."

"You still studying?"

"Sergeant's exam's not for another six months, Mom."

She gave me her patented mom look. "I know how you operate, Stef. Always at the last minute. Look, hit the books now, you'll be that much more prepared when the time comes."

I smiled. "Okay. I'll dig into them tonight."

She flipped a card. "Liar," she said, which caused both of us to laugh.

Another flip of the card. "You've been to the house lately?"

"Yesterday, Mom. Mail is all caught up, lawn got mowed last week, and the plants are still alive."

"Good . . . You know," she said, her voice wistful, "I have such a pretty view here, but nothing like what I have at home, especially from the rear deck. The state forest, all those tall evergreens, the birds, even the occasional deer. Sweet God, I can hardly wait to get out of here, get back to where I belong."

"And when's that, Mom?"

"Soon," she said, lying with ease. "Soon enough, and sooner still if you kill off my plants."

We laughed again, still another good sign, and then when I was going to ask her how her day had gone—the usual tale of the bus trip, the radiation dose, the vomiting battle either won or lost—she surprised me by saying, "I'd like to ask you to do a favor for me."

"A favor? Sure."

She flipped another card. "A special favor. One that has to be quiet, between us. Don't tell your brothers, all right?"

I looked to her nightstand, which had four framed photos on it. Two were family portraits of my older brothers, Don and Lee, with their respective wives and children, or sisters-in-law and nieces and nephews, depending on your perspective. Don was a software engineer and Lee sold insurance. Both lived hundreds of miles away, and while I loved them as much as a sister could, I found them both exceptionally dull, and was secretly glad that we only got together during the holidays.

The third portrait was a framed shot of me, soon after being sworn in as an officer, with my own long red hair tucked up under my uniform cap, and with a serious expression on my face that looked as if I had received an enema an hour beforehand and desperately needed to get to the bathroom before trouble ensued.

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The fourth, a black-and-white, was of Mom in her own Porter Police Department uniform, sitting on the edge of an office desk, laughing. I always liked that pic. Even with the severe-looking uniform of the day, Mom looked seductive sitting on the desk, legs crossed, with a ready smile and a cute bod that filled out the uniform pretty well. Another of Mom's secrets—I gathered that she was quite the va-va-va-voom gal when she was younger, but I only heard those tales from the old-timers at the department. Never from Mom.

Anyway, I looked to Mom and said, "All right. A favor. Just for you. Our secret. What is it? Want to make a break for it? Get down to Rio for the holiday?"

That brought another smile, and I felt really damn good this visit—right up until the favor was asked.

Then I didn't feel so good at all.

Mom reached over to her nightstand, opened up a drawer, pulled out a thick file folder. She passed it over to me and I looked at the name, the date—more than forty years ago!—and then looked back to Mom and said, "This is a case file. From the department."

"Yes, it is," she said.

"But you shouldn't have it. It shouldn't have left the records department."

A faint shrug. "Some people still remember me back there, Stef. They don't mind bending the rules a bit."

I let it sit in my lap, as if ignoring it would make it go away. "What's the case?"

"Mimi Summers. Died in August nineteen sixty-seven. My very first unattended death as a patrol officer."

"What happened?"

Mom went back to her cards. "Cause of death was officially ruled a suicide. But I've always thought otherwise."

I checked the date again. "You were . . . what . . . six months on the job then?"

"After working as a dispatcher and jail matron, that's right. Before they finally let me into their little boys' club and let me carry a gun and handcuffs."

"But you wouldn't have handled the case," I said. "The detectives would have worked it. Right?"

She looked up at me. "True. But I was first on the scene, Stef. I made the first canvass of the neighborhood, talked to the first witnesses. Sure, the detectives took it away from me in less than an hour . . . but that was my first, and it was mine. And now I'm asking you for a favor."

"What's that?"

"I want you to take a look at the case file."

"What for?"

"What do you think?" she shot back. "This case has bugged me,

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Stef. Bugged me for years. And I always wanted to take another look at it, one more in-depth look, to dig up what really happened . . . and I always kept on putting it off, putting it off. Well, I don't want to put it off anymore . . . and since I won't be leaving these charming accommodations any time soon, I need your help."

"Mom . . ."

"Don't 'Mom' me," she said sharply. "Take a look, that's all I ask."

"You haven't told me why, Mom."

"Christ on a crutch, Daughter, do I have to spell it out for you? There's no statute of limitations on homicide. You know that."

The case file felt like a chunk of lead in my lap, freezing me in place. I took a breath, thought carefully of the next few sentences I was going to say. "You want me, a patrol officer in the department, not assigned to the detective division, to look at a forty-year-old case to determine if it might be a homicide. Is that what you're asking?"

Her face had the pleased look I had seen as a daughter in the fifth grade successfully reciting the Gettysburg Address from memory in front of a school assembly. "Yes, Stef, that's exactly what I'm asking."

I waited another moment, waited for that sweet temper of mine that goes along with my red hair to subside, and I said, "Sure, Mom. I'll do that."

"Thank you," she said.

"No problem," I said, which was a lie, for at that moment I was damning her, the Porter Police Department, and those rogue cells in her body that were betraying her.

I resisted the urge to open the file then and there, and said, "Mom, tell me what happened. Your own words. All right?"

Her eyes glittered some, like those of an old veteran once more being called to duty. "Sure. My first unattended death. Never forgot it. I was assigned to foot patrol, down by Harborside. This was nineteen sixty-seven, long before the urban renewal, long before the Navy cut back its presence at the Navy Yard. So it was a rough stretch of town, Stef, much rougher than anyone can remember. All those pretty tourists that go down there now . . . they wouldn't have lasted more than five minutes back in the bad old days."

"On the job just six months, and you were patrolling by yourself? In Harborside?"

"You forget, Stef. I was the first woman patrol officer. The very first . . . and the department was determined to make me quit. So I had the crap assignments, right from the start. Overseeing the drunk tank on weekends, when the floors were slick with vomit and piss. Working the eleven P.M. to seven A.M. shifts . . . and being called in for mandatory overtime when you kids had some school function I wanted to go to. And working Harborside by myself, with the druggies, drunks, sailors on the prowl, and assorted losers vying for attention. All designed to push me out. From the

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chief to the detectives to the other officers. They all wanted me gone." She gave a harsh laugh. "Guess it didn't work, did it?"

"What happened that night?"

From the nightstand she grabbed a cup of water, took a long drink. Another tiny victory. She said, "It was past closing time. About three A.M., if I remember. This woman came up to me on the sidewalk . . . Doris Mooney. She was worried. Her roommate hadn't come home yet. Mimi Summers. Seems Mimi worked at the Virgin Mermaid, a bar on Ceres Street. It was a Sunday night . . . and Mimi usually closed up. But she hadn't come home and Doris was worried." She paused and said, "Well, Doris was also drunk and probably high on weed at the time, but the two of them had an after-hours party they were going to. And it was never like Mimi to miss action like that."

"So you went to the bar."

"Yep."

"What then?"

"Got in, saw the poor girl in the center of the barroom, dead. Hanging from the rafter, rope around her neck, barstool tipped over on the floor. My very first dead body . . . and you know what I remember?"

My fingers traced the edge of the file folder. "No, what do you remember?"

"The smell . . . the smell of death. Just filled that little room. And her roommate, how she screamed and screamed and screamed . . . until I dragged her out and cuffed her to a lamppost, just to get her out of the way. And then I made a call from a call box, and then the big boys came in, did their thing, made me do a canvass of the area and talk to neighbors, take their statements, and a week later, I saw the little story in the *Porter Herald*. Death ruled a suicide. That's it. Asshole detectives didn't have the courtesy to tell me in person. I had to read it in the damn paper."

"They must have had reason to rule it a suicide," I said.

"Sure," she said. "Lack of curiosity, that's why. The two guys back then—Harmon Brewster and Frank Flannery—they styled themselves after Jack Webb and Harry Morgan. Joe Friday and Bill Gannon. Just the facts, ma'am. You know what I mean."

I looked oddly at my mom. "No, I don't."

She looked peeved. "*Dragnet*. A television show. You must have heard of that somewhere along the line, haven't you?"

"Nope. Just remember an awful movie long time ago, when I was in grammar school. Dan Aykroyd and Tom Hanks were in it. That was called *Dragnet*. I saw it at a Saturday matinee. It sucked."

She still looked peeved. "The things you young'uns don't know. *Dragnet* was a television show about police detectives in Los Angeles. Harmon and Frank idolized them, wanted to do everything by procedure and by the book, and the book told them that all the signs pointed to a suicide, so therefore, it had to be a suicide. Case closed. For them. But not for me. I remember trying to talk to

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them about it, and they just wanted to joke about cookie recipes and what I did with my nightstick at night by myself. Jerks."

"Why wasn't it closed for you? What did you know that the detectives didn't know?"

"That Mimi wasn't one for killing herself. She was doing all right. She was popular, she enjoyed her job, she had lots of friends. Was even thinking about going back to college. Nothing to indicate a suicide."

I looked at Mom for a moment, keeping quiet, and said, "Mom. Come on. You know how it is. Suicides have their own logic. What did the evidence indicate?"

She grimaced. "It's all in there."

"I'm sure it is. But you tell me. What does the evidence show?"

Mom turned her head to look out the window. There was a faint smear of skin lotion across her cheek. "Death by strangulation. Last meal of potato chips and cocktail peanuts. Blood alcohol content showed that she'd had some drinks. No bruising on her arms, no bruising on her legs, to indicate she'd been bound. And before you ask, no, the hyoid bone in her throat wasn't broken. So she wasn't manually strangled and then hung to cover it up."

"Still . . ."

"And one more thing. She had had sexual intercourse prior to her death."

"Rape?"

"No sign of bruising or bleeding. Most likely consensual. Like I said . . . Mimi enjoyed life. She had no reason to kill herself."

Mom coughed and said, "Daughter . . . I'm getting tired. Look, you'll do this thing for me, won't you?"

I picked up the old file folder. "Will you tell me how you're doing?"

"I'm doing fine."

"Mom . . ."

"Kiss me and get going, will you?"

Other times, this would have descended into the sharp little exchanges that mothers and daughters seem to call their own, but this wasn't like any other time. I got up and kissed her forehead—still cool and moist, today's victory was lasting—and said, "All right, Mom. I'm on the case."

She reached up, squeezed my hand, a weak grasp, and the victory took a bit of a hit. "I knew you would. I knew you would, Stef."

Home was a condo unit overlooking the harbor, pricey indeed, but the realtor never did mention the twice-daily event of low tide, when the mud flats stunk like the tail end of a circus elephant parade. But I was used to the stench and sat on the deck, file in hand, and got to work.

Mimi Summers, of 125 State Street, apartment 3. Born February 1, 1944, in Dover, N.H.—the next city north of Porter—and

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died August 12, 1967, at the Virgin Mermaid, Ceres Street, Portsmouth. Just over twenty-three years of age. There was a black-and-white photo of her. Cute girl, big black bouffant hairdo, like something Jackie Kennedy would have been wearing back then, still mourning the death of her husband. Nice, charming smile, and it made me a bit melancholy thinking of that smile stilled, so many years ago, when she should be alive now, ready to receive her first Social Security check.

I dug into the file, saw the crime-scene photos. Hard to match the formal portrait with her death portraits. Face puffy, swollen, lips protruding, rope deep into her throat. Poor dear. The photos showed the process of the photography: her hanging from the rafter, taken from a distance; close-up photo of tilted head, like she was trying forever to hear something; another photo of her on the floor of the restaurant; and yet another, on the gurney, ready for a final ride to the county medical examiner's office.

The paperwork gave a little jolt to the back of my brain, seeing familiar handwriting: statements from the neighbors, faithfully transcribed by my mother, to exist forever in these files, so long as there was a Porter police department and someone to look over its records. The same handwriting that used to remind me to pick up groceries on the way home from school, or tell the school nurse about a fever, here recorded the findings of cops from more than four decades ago. There were also a few newspaper clippings from the *Porter Herald*. *LOCAL BARMAID FOUND DEAD* was one headline. A preliminary autopsy report: death by strangulation by self-induced hanging. The contents of her stomach, the alcohol level in her blood. A receipt from the evidence locker. And a few other odds and ends as well, including a memo from the lead detective on the case, Harmon Brewster, to the chief of police at the time, indicating that the case was closed and that no further investigation was warranted.

That was that. I closed the folder, breathed in the stench of life from out there on the mud flats. I went to the phonebook and looked up something, and then decided it was time to make dinner.

I had the next day off, and after a brief visit to make sure Mom had some sort of breakfast—and by some unspoken agreement, neither of us said anything about the Mimi Summers case—I did some poking around. I had three places to go to. The first was the easiest. 125 State Street, apartment 3. After so many years, I wasn't sure what to expect, and I wasn't disappointed. The place was right in the middle of downtown, an old frame house that had been gutted and renovated. People no longer lived at 125 State Street; it was now a dentist's office and a home health supply store.

From there I walked to Ceres Street, taking my time, watching the tourists at play. Even now my mom cackles with laughter thinking about tourists coming to this old port city. When I was a

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child and she was on the force, Porter was still a rough-and-tumble port town whose bars had sawdust on the floor, and where Navy personnel and crewmen from the freighters got into bloody brawls in said bars. Now, after years of rehab and hard work on the part of the Chamber of Commerce and others, the city is known for its colonial history and charming shops and pubs.

Like the ones crowding Ceres Street, a narrow cobblestoned avenue flanked on one side by brick buildings and on the other by docks and the harbor. My mom told me that during the street's heyday, cops would only travel down it in pairs after dark, sometimes with their weapons drawn. It had been that rough.

Now, well, the Virgin Mermaid was no more. It was a shop specializing in stained glass, called, in a manner of breathtaking boredom—I kid you not—the Glass Menagerie. I stood before it, looked at the wrought-iron lamppost nearby, and thought of my young mom handcuffing Mimi Summers's friend so she could go about her work. The thought actually made me smile. I opened the door and walked in.

It was cool, and the place smelled of fresh flowers and cinnamon. There were tables and shelving and placed there and hanging in the windows were pieces of stained glass. They looked pretty interesting—flowers, birds, seascapes, and landscapes—but my interest was beaten down pretty quickly when I saw the nearest price tag, about equal to my monthly rent.

The place had changed a lot since its bar days, but the rafters had remained. I recalled the crime-scene photo, and looking up, moved around some until the spot came into view. Right there. That was where the rope was knotted, that was where it had been, that's where Mimi Summers's life had ended, right—

"Excuse me, can I help you?" came a soft voice.

I turned and a sweet young thing was there, about ten years younger than me, dressed in a sleeveless black number that showed off her arms and her tattoos of skulls and flames. Her hair was black as well, with streaks of pink along the side.

"No, I think I'm all set," I said.

"I see," she replied. "I noticed you were looking at the wooden beams. Was there something there that interested you?"

"Not now. Maybe forty years ago."

She looked puzzled. "I . . . I'm not sure what you mean."

I shrugged. "Neither am I."

My third stop of the day was in a semi-rural part of Porter, where a small trailer park rested. In my years on the force, I'd gotten to know all of the trailer parks in town. Some were good, and some were not so good, like the one I drove into. Pleasant Valley Estates had a grand name, but it wasn't in a valley, wasn't an estate, and didn't look very pleasant. The mobile homes were old, sagging at

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their foundations, with rust stains on the sides, and standing puddles of water in muddy areas that should have been lawns.

I stopped before one that had a small wooden sign out front, consisting of two wooden skunks holding a nameplate between them: BREWSTER. I parked the car and went up a creaky set of steps, and knocked at the door.

And knocked on the door a few more times before it was answered, by a stooped-over older man, wearing a soiled white T-shirt and black sweatpants. He was almost completely bald, with a thatch of white hair for his eyebrows, and twin tufts coming out of his ears.

"Yeah?" came the voice, as he opened the door a bit.

"Mister Brewster? Harmon Brewster?"

"Yeah, that's right. Who are you?"

"Stephanie Powers. I'm with the Porter Police Department. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a few minutes, about an old case of yours."

His eyes squinted some. "Show me your ID, then."

I did.

He looked at it and then looked at me, and passed my ID back, hand trembling. "Says here you're an officer. Not a detective. Not even a sergeant. What's up with that, girl?"

I used the lie I had rehearsed on the way over. "I'm taking night courses to get an advanced degree in criminal justice. As part of the program, they require you to look at a cold case from the department files, take a fresh look at it. That's what I'm doing."

He peered at me some more and said, "I know you, don't I?"

"No, I'm afraid you don't."

"Damn, you look damn familiar. Powers . . . hold on. Your mother, she wouldn't be Jackie Powers, would she?"

"That she is."

"Hah." His face took on a bit more life. "You anything like her?"

"I hope not," I said, and that got the desired response.

He opened the door wider. "Then I guess you can come in."

When I first joined the force, I liked to pretend that my uniform gave me an invisible shield as I entered trailers and unheated shacks and walk-up apartments that had last been renovated during the Eisenhower Administration. Seeing the junk and filth that people could live in, from all ages and backgrounds, made my skin crawl, and I got through it by pretending my uniform had magic powers.

Sure wished I had my uniform on today.

The living room smelled of old medicine and mothballs. The television was on and set to the History Channel—a most popular channel with old men and book-reading geeks, I've come to discover—and the furniture consisted of a couch and two chairs, all covered in a plaid fabric that was shiny with use. He sat down on the couch and I took one of the chairs. The other chair was piled high

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with old newspapers and magazines. The carpet was orange shag, faded almost to white. As he sat, the legs of his sweatpants rolled up, revealing skinny white shins. He coughed some and I spared a glance at the paneled wall. Lots of photos of a much younger Harmon Brewster, as a Porter cop, and then later, as a Porter detective. As a detective, I saw what Mom had mentioned earlier: Harmon was sharply dressed for the time, with a wide, mocking grin that announced to the world that he was on top of the police world and was enjoying it mightily. There were a few family pictures as well, the color in the photos faded, making everything look yellowish.

He coughed some more and said, "What case? Which one?"

"Mimi Summers."

"Who?"

"Mimi Summers. Summer of nineteen sixty-seven."

He shook his head. "Sorry, don't remember. A long time ago . . . I mean, Jesus, nineteen sixty-seven. What else can you tell me about it? Was it a homicide?"

"Apparent suicide," I said. "Mimi worked at the Virgin Mermaid, on Ceres Street. She was found hanging from the rafters by an on-duty officer."

He slapped a hand on his knee. "Cripes, yes, Mimi . . . I remember Mimi. My, that was a long time ago. Mimi Summers. What a hot ticket. Nice little bod, nice smile, gave us boys free coffee at night . . . I remember now."

"Do you remember anything about the case?"

He shrugged. "Cripes, that was a hell of a long time ago. Check out the case file, if it still exists. Just remember she hung herself . . . and you know what I thought at the time? What a waste of a perfectly hot little girl. Just a waste."

I smiled, clenching my teeth all the while. "I suppose the medical examiner came back with a finding of suicide, right?"

"Sure they did," he said. "Mm . . . we even had them check the bone in the neck . . . the hyoid. Always snaps if it's manual strangulation with a hand or garrote. Never from a suicide like that. Never. And yeah, I remember now. The hyoid was intact. There you go. Suicide."

"But she didn't leave a note."

"Honey, how long you been with the department?"

"Five years," I said.

"Hah. When it's been fifteen, come back and check with me. You find people kill themselves over the stupidest things, and they don't always leave a note. We didn't have anything else at the time, so there you go. Suicide. Poor little girl . . . always wondered how she ended up there at the Virgin Mermaid."

"What do you mean?"

"Girl couldn't hold her liquor. You get one drink into her and . . . Well, I'm talking out of school, but the poor thing's been dead for years. One-Drink Mimi." He laughed, a honking sound that made

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my skin feel like ants were crawling on it.

I nodded politely and said, "You've been very helpful. Your partner . . . Frank Flannery."

"What about him?"

"I was hoping I could talk to him as well. See what he remembered about the case. Do you know where he is?"

Another honking laugh. "Sure I do, and you can talk to him, but it's gonna be a pretty one-sided conversation. Poor bastard's been dead about twenty years now. He's up at Memorial Hill Cemetery."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Well, shit happens, you know. Got run down by a drunk driver, right after he left the American Legion Hall. Poor Frank. I'm sure he had a buzz on but still . . . young high-school kid, drunk on wine coolers, took him out. And Frank shouldn't have been drinking there anyhow."

"Really?" I asked. "Why's that?"

He rubbed at his chin, and I saw a patch of stubble where he had missed shaving that morning. "Frank had a nickname he hated . . . and most people left him alone, but you know how guys are. Once they got drinking, especially vets. Ol' No-Balls Frank, that's what they called him . . . though he was the ballsiest cop I ever knew. Saw him take on three drunk sailors, off of a submarine in the Navy Yard for refueling, and he had them on the ground, knocked out, cuffed, before I even got out of the cruiser."

"How did he get a nickname like that?"

Another rub of the chin. "Frank was in the Army, in Korea. Got wounded on some frozen hill. Some mortar shrapnel took him out in the crotch. No-Balls Frank. Oh, he could piss and all that, but that's about it. No wife, no kids . . . just the job."

He nodded up at the family pictures. "Days like these, I sometimes envy him. See that? My goddamn wife Esther. Divorced my ass once I retired, so she could get a piece of my pension. And my worthless son Jake. Some computer whiz kid who thinks he's my dad now . . . made me give up my driver's license when my eyes got bad, so here I am, stuck except for cabs or some neighbors take pity on me and get me out of this dump."

"Oh."

"I know what you're thinking," he said stubbornly. "Then why do I have the picture up there? 'Cause the damn thing covers a hole in the paneling, that's why."

"I see." I started to get up and I said, "Well, I appreciate your time, Mr. Brewster, and—"

He grinned, revealing yellow teeth. "You can do me a favor, girl. Considering all the time I just gave you."

"What's that?"

"There's a packie outside of the trailer park. Why don't you stroll over there, grab me a six-pack. Don't mind what it is, long as it's

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cold and has a bite. Be a good girl."

My smile finally slipped. "I'm sorry, I really don't have the time."

His smile slipped even further than mine. "Don't be such a stuck-up bitch. It's not like I'm asking you to show me your tits or anything. Just a goddamn six-pack. I'll pay for it, you know."

"It's warm out, and still light," I said. "Don't you think the walk would do you good?"

"I don't want to go for a goddamn walk!" he barked. "I just want some beer!"

Then it all came together: alone in the trailer, license and car taken away from him, hands trembling. No doubt the packie knew him quite well, and no doubt his son had told the store's owners not to sell his father any booze.

I made for the door and said, "Sorry," again as he called out something about me being as bitchy as my mother, and two worthless bitches like us, yadda yadda yadda.

When I got in my car, my hands were trembling almost as much as his.

Off to see Mom again, and going into the room, I could tell it had been a bad day. The room wasn't lit, she was curled up on her side, just breathing, staring out the window, out at the great big outside that promised so much fun and life. I wondered how she could stand it. I walked to her bed, kissed her forehead. Dry and very hot.

I sat down. "Hard day."

"Oh yeah," she said, her voice just above a whisper. "Days like this, dear, that's when I miss home the most. . . . And you?"

"Working the Mimi Summers case, Mom, just like I promised."

If she had had the strength, I think she would have smiled. Her lips just moved a bit and she said, "Good."

"Can I ask you a couple of things?"

"Sure . . ."

"You looked at the case file, didn't you, before you gave it to me?"

"Yes . . ."

I leaned forward on the chair. "So why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me the case had been cleaned up, vacuumed. That's what."

She closed her eyes and I thought she had fallen asleep, but the whisper came back. "What do you mean, Stef?"

"I mean the file's full of crap. There's no full autopsy report from the medical examiner's office. No formal investigative report from the two detectives. Just a prelim report from the medical examiner, some notes from you, and some newspaper clippings and other odds and ends and photos. That's all."

"I see. . . ."

"Mom, what's going on? What really happened back then?"

She grimaced and said, "Stef . . . I'm so tired. . . ."

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"Mom . . ."

"Stef . . . please . . . you're a smart girl . . . just keep working on it for me, okay? Please?"

I folded my arms, stayed there, stayed there while she fell asleep, and I stayed for a long time, as the room grew darker, and then I got out of my chair and kissed her forehead again.

"You got it, Mom," I said, and then I left.

The next day was a workday, and I had foot patrol in the Market Square area of town, a nice upscale place, and as I gave directions to lost tourists and answered parking-ticket complaints, I thought of Mom, about my age, working the very mean streets of Harborside at night all by herself, with no hand-held radio, no bulletproof vest, no Mace canister at her side to help in fights.

All by her lonesome.

But times had changed, had changed a lot, and I was counting on that as I went back to the station for a quick lunch, which I gobbled down to give myself a bit of spare time, which I used by taking over one of the cubicles we lowly street cops use for writing up our reports and such.

This time, it was a phone call, and a phone call to the county medical-examiner's office. I asked for Rachel Tasker, a classmate of mine from the Academy, who dumped cop work after a few months and went on to medical school, and years later, with me at Porter, and she with the county, we sometimes traded tips and gossip. Part of the all-powerful, all-secret Sisterhood. Or something like that.

"Tasker," she said, answering the phone, and I said, "Hey, Rache . . . it's Stef."

"Stef? Girl, it's been a long time. What's up? Got a body in your trunk, need to know what to do with it?"

"I wish," I said. "That'd be easier than what I'm doing now."

"Oh," she said. "Sorry. How's your mom?"

"Hanging in there, day by day . . . which is why I'm calling you."

"Really?" she said, and I detected the scepticism in her voice. I went on and said, "Look, I'm on my lunch break, but I need a favor. Mom . . . sometimes she has these bad days, when things slip up some, and right now, she's focused on her early days in the department, when she was the only female cop."

"Poor dear," Rachel said. "Go ahead."

"Well . . . she's obsessing over this untimely death she helped investigate, back in 'sixty-seven. She wants to have it . . . well, settled in her mind, just in case she doesn't get better and . . . shit, Rache, I'm speaking in circles here."

"Hon, just tell me what you want."

I took a deep breath. "A case from nineteen sixty-seven. Untimely death. I've gone through the case file but the autopsy report's missing. It'd mean a lot to me and Mom if I could get a copy."

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"From this office? Back in nineteen sixty-seven?"

"Yeah," I said. "Mimi Summers. Apparent suicide, August nineteen sixty-seven."

Rachel whistled. "Hon, I'll see what I can do . . . but man, nineteen sixty-seven. I sometimes have a hell of a time looking for something from last year. No promises. That's the best I can do. Is that okay?"

"That'd be great. Thanks, Rache, I'll owe you one."

"Yeah, a big one. Now, get your ass back to work and start protecting the streets again, okay?"

"Sure."

Home after shift, looking through the case file, looking through the paperwork, and then, picking up a tiny slip of cardboard.

Held it in my hand.

"Idiot," I whispered, and even off shift and off the city's clock, I went back to work.

In the basement of the Porter Police Department, in the Evidence Room, I lucked out. Due to a series of budget cutbacks, a lot of little functions the department used to pay for are now taken care of in other ways. Part of life, I guess, and if the city of Porter wanted to pay money to fly the mayor to a sister city in Kazakhstan, who was I to complain? But like I said, I lucked out, because the Evidence section this evening was being overseen by a male college intern, working on his criminal-justice degree. I'm sure that most nights this allowed him to catch up on his studying while helping the cops catalog and file evidence, but this wasn't one of those nights.

It sounds harsh, but since he was an intern, I didn't bother to learn his name, or even remember his name when he told me. I just showed him my ID and passed over the little stub of cardboard that I'd found in the case file.

"I need everything you've got on this case," I said. "And don't give me a look because it's from nineteen sixty-seven. If it's back there, I want to see it. Okay?"

And like all interns who want to impress, he nodded and moved back into the gloom of the shelves.

I waited. Tapping my fingers on the counter before me.

Waited.

Something fell back there, and I heard a muttered curse.

Progress, I hoped.

Then, movement.

He emerged from the gloom. Covered with dust, bleeding from a cut on his forehead, but holding up a paper bag in triumph.

God bless the Porter Police Department from 1967, for the evidence was in an IGA grocery bag, folded over and held together with brown tape. The intern slid the Evidence Room log over to me

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and I scribbled something that couldn't be read, and then took the bag away. According to procedure, the evidence bag shouldn't have left the department, but I was way beyond procedure this night. The bag went back with me and then to the kitchen table of my condo, and I had the oddest thought as I undid the top of the bag, that if the bag wasn't permeable at all, then I was opening up air that had been sealed long before I was born.

A cool thought, but one that didn't prevent me from going inside.

Pretty thin, was my first thought, as I took out a woman's purse, some papers, and another, smaller folded-over bag. The papers were Mimi's timecards and pay stubs from the Virgin Mermaid—and looking at what she got paid back then, I sure as hell hoped she did well with tips. I put that aside. In her thin black leather purse were keys for an apartment that was no longer an apartment, keys to a bar that was no longer a bar, and reminders of a life that was no longer a life. The purse had some change, a ten-dollar bill, and two singles, and folded up in a corner, a two-dollar bill with a grim portrait of Jefferson. There were some faded black-and-white photographs of some relatives, some six-cent postage stamps, a New Hampshire driver's license, and, poignantly enough, in back, a sealed condom, wrinkled and dried.

How about that.

More digging around in the wallet and I found something else, in a little compartment that was easy to miss. A business card. I slid it out and said, "Damn," in a little whisper.

A business card belonging to Detective Frank Flannery, Porter Police Department, with a phone number scrawled on the back.

"Damn," I said again, and put the card down, and then went to the smaller paper bag. I opened it up and slid out the contents, or content, for it was a pair of women's underwear, white cotton.

Or panties. For some reason, all the men I know get giggly and horny at the mention of panties, but this bit of cotton was just underwear. That's all.

But there was more, as I quickly learned, unfolding them.

Stains. Urine stains, I'm sure, from when the bladder let loose after her death . . . but there were other stains as well.

How about that, I thought. *How about that.*

The next day I did something I rarely do, which was to call in sick. My union being a take-it-to-the-streets-and-let's-hammer-some-heads union, I didn't have to supply a good reason or a doctor's note, so I was safe for the day. Of course, being truthful, I could have said I was sick at what I had to do that day, which wasn't a lie but was a pretty good stretch of the truth.

On this special day, I rummaged through my bureau, pulled out a black lace bra that I've worn twice for dating circumstances that ended in disaster, and a thong panty that some male suitor had

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given me a few years back, under the ill-conceived notion that the way to a woman's heart was through uncomfortable undergarments. I also struggled to put on a pair of tight white slacks that made my butt look big enough to have its own time zone, and a tight, low-cut black sweater. I spent a few extra minutes with the makeup—as if I needed such support while working the street—and during one final mirror check before I left, I was both cheered and horrified at how easy it was to see my nipples.

And then I grabbed what I needed and left for the hour's drive to Concord, the state capital, home to many state offices, including the state crime lab.

Luck was indeed riding at my side that morning, for I was able to see my target with no difficulty: Jeff Wheeler, a very bright and inquisitive crime-lab tech who's done some great work for me and the department. Despite the fact that his weight was nearing the mark where the first numeral was about to slide from two to three, a recurring case of bad breath, and a fondness for creepy writers like H.P. Lovecraft and Stephen King, he would make a great catch. Or so he probably thought, as he'd made so many moves on me over the years that he was something to be pitied.

But not today. It was my time to make the moves.

When he came into his cluttered office, I thought the poor fellow was going to have a coronary, the way he stared at me and tried to get to his chair without taking his gaze off my boobs. He sat down, breathing hard, smiling, and said, "Stef . . . you, um, look great. What can I do for you?"

I leaned over his desk, feeling the cold air on my cleavage as I slid the small brown paper bag across. "I need a favor, Jeff . . . a very unofficial, very discreet favor."

He swallowed, took the bag, all the while keeping his eyes on all that forbidden flesh, just inches away from his grasp. "Okay . . . um, what is it?"

"A piece of evidence. From an old crime scene."

"How old?"

"Forty plus years."

Jeff shook his head. "Sweet Jesus, Stef . . . that's old. What is it, and what are you looking for?"

"Woman's underwear. Semen stains. The underwear's been stored fairly well over the years, Jeff. I'm sure you can tease out a DNA analysis, can't you? Something that would stand up in court?"

"Shit, Stef, I don't know . . ."

Another lean over the desk. "Come on, Jeff. You've told me you're the best in New England. Don't you want to prove it?"

He tried to laugh, all the while still staring. Quite the feat. "Um, sure, I guess I could."

I smiled. "You're a dear. When can I have it?"

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"Oh, not that long. Six to eight weeks."

I pouted, shook my head. "Jeff . . . please, it can't be that long. Can't you speed it up?"

"Stef," he said, "I'd love to but . . . you're asking for something unofficial, something I'd have to do on off hours, and we're so backed up as it is, and—"

I sighed and made a motion with my arm, knocked over some papers. I made a show of getting up and bending over and picking them up, making sure my thong-clad butt was waving in his face, knowing the slacks were riding low and that he was getting a view of the other cleavage. Not as attractive as the other white meat, but I was working with what I had.

With the papers back on his desk, his face even more red, Jeff said, "How does tomorrow sound?"

"Tomorrow sounds marvelous, Jeff. Thank you so much."

He swallowed, stammered a bit, and said, "Um, you doing anything this weekend?"

For you, Mom, only for you. "Not a thing. What do you have in mind?"

"Over at the Majestic Theatre. This Saturday. It's a day-long marathon: all three of the *Lord of the Rings* films. I was thinking—"

I reached out, touched his hand. "Jeff, I'd love to."

And then I departed, before getting sick on that lovely light-green rug in his office.

After showering and changing out of my rent-a-tart clothes, I went back to see Mom, and she was doing a bit better, and for some reason, I just held her hand while we talked about nothing in particular, and then she paused and said, "What's bothering you, hon?"

"Something I did today, and wasn't too proud of doing."

"What was that?"

"Oh, stupid stuff. Using my wily female ways to get something I needed from a man with the attention span of a horny sixteen-year-old."

That garnered a smile from Mom, a victory that pleased me. "We do what we can, with what we have. When I was your age . . . Stef, just getting a bathroom to call your own was a major victory. Not to mention a locker room where you could get in and out of your uniform without being spied on . . . simple things like that. Or the time we got our first bulletproof vests. The very first ones had no models for women, so I had to order one that was large and tighten up the straps as best I could. But I made do. Just like you. Even if the cops and detectives and chief made everything miserable."

She squeezed my hand. "If you had to get something important done, then . . . don't worry about it."

"I won't."

Another hand squeeze. "How are you doing with Mimi Summers?"

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I squeezed back. "When does the doctor think you can go home?"

"Not now, Daughter. Later."

"Okay."

We sat in silence for a bit, and she said, "Mimi Summers . . . what's going on with that?"

I kept my hand in hers. "Not now, Mom. Later."

The ringing phone blasted me out of sleep, and I had two quick and horrible thoughts: that something had happened to Mom and she was gone and I had screwed it up, not finishing everything before she passed, and the other thought was that something bad had happened at the department, and I grabbed the phone and croaked out something, and a voice said, "Stef?"

"Yeah," I said, waking up better and realizing I was on the couch. Damn.

"Stef, it's Rachel. You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, yawning. "God. Sorry about that. Fell asleep on the couch. What's up, girlfriend?"

She laughed. "I'm late for dinner with a promising young man, and I wanted to call you first. Believe it or not, I found that autopsy report. Must be a full moon or something, but there it was. Mimi Summers, August nineteen sixty-seven."

I was no longer sleepy. "What can you tell me?"

"Customary and usual. Young lady, alcohol in her system, about point-ten, which meant that driving was out of the question if she didn't want to get bagged for DWI. And death was ruled suicide by strangulation. Straight and to the point."

"Oh. Okay, thanks then."

She said, "You owe me. Oh, and one other thing."

"What's that?"

She told me.

That one other thing meant I wasn't going back to sleep that night.

"Rache," I finally said. "You're a dear."

"Thank you kindly," she said. "And someday, you'll tell me what this is all about, won't you?"

"Of course. Someday."

But not anytime soon, I thought, as I hung up the phone.

When the sun came up next, I kept on being a very bad girl, and called in sick one more time, and waited by the phone, and my heavyset suitor was pleasantly predictable, when he called me at nine A.M. and said, "I knew I could do it, Stef. Knew it."

"You got the DNA analysis?"

"Oh yes," Jeff said. "Managed to tease it out just fine. Now, if this is something connected to some sort of criminal activity, and you bring me another sample to match, I wouldn't have a problem

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making a positive ID that could stand up in court. Not at all. Of course, that might mean another date. Hah-hah."

"Yes," I said, "hah-hah."

"So," and his voice changed tenor in that one syllable. "We, uh, still on for Saturday?"

For someone as bad as I was being, I suppose I could have begged off. But I couldn't do it.

"Yes," I said. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Honestly?"

I thought, compared to what I've got planned for today, oh yes, oh yes indeed.

"Yes," I said. "Honestly."

Later that afternoon, I found myself back at Pleasant Valley Estates. Earlier I had done a bit of actual police work involving one of those bureaucracies that had you press every key on your phone receiver before you got to talk to a real live person, but it had been worth the long waits on hold, while hearing "The Girl from Impanema" over and over again.

Now I was back at the sad-looking trailer with the two happy skunks holding up the BREWSTER sign, and another series of knocks led to Harmon Brewster, opening the same door, apparently wearing the same black sweat pants and white T-shirt. He looked pretty damn grim, but I was carrying something that changed his mood: a paper bag with a six-pack of Budweiser beer bottles.

"Hey," he said, grinning. "What's this all about?"

"I felt bad after leaving yesterday," I said, which technically wasn't a lie. "And I wanted to make it up to you." Which was definitely a lie.

He opened the door, still grinning, and I followed him to the living room and took the six-pack and put it on a coffee table. He grabbed a bottle, twisted the cap off, and brought it up and consumed about a third of the bottle in one long swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down like some damn pump.

"Aaaahh," he said, pulling the bottle away. "Man, that does hit the spot. Thanks, little girl, thanks a lot."

"No problem."

He brought the bottle back up and then, perhaps dimly remembering something he was taught about manners, he said, "Gonna join me?"

"Maybe later, Mr. Brewster. Maybe later. Go ahead . . . there's plenty more."

And sure enough, in about another sixty seconds, the first bottle was empty, carefully placed back on the coffee table. When he was busy opening up the second bottle, I reached over and picked up the empty bottle by the base. Empty bottle in hand, I reached into my jacket pocket with another hand, took out a plastic evidence bag, and gingerly placed the bottle inside and closed off the plastic.

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The second bottle was about half finished before he realized what he had seen. "What . . . what the hell was that all about?"

"That," I said, standing up, "was about Mimi Summers. That's what."

His face colored to scarlet. "What the hell you mean by that?"

"What I mean is Mimi Summers. Mimi who had the business card of your partner in her wallet. But with your phone number scribbled on the back. What was that about, you didn't have a card, you had to give her one of his? And what I mean, too, is her underwear. Still in evidence forty years later, still there with a semen stain forty years later. A semen stain that's given up its DNA evidence."

I held up the plastic bag with the beer bottle. "DNA evidence I'm sure is going to match your saliva on this bottle."

"You . . . you . . . you . . ."

"Her case file is strange, you know, when you look through it," I said. "It's been sanitized. And who back then had the stones to sanitize a file like that? Only the lead detectives on the case. You and Frank. And it certainly wasn't Frank."

He was breathing hard, not speaking, the half-full bottle of beer in his gnarled hand. "And you know why? Because the autopsy report—and let's bless those government agencies who can't bear to throw anything away—showed something else besides her cause of death. She was pregnant. About three months along, and she sure as hell wasn't pregnant with Ol' No-Balls Frank's child. Once the body's exhumed, and the fetus is examined, well, it's amazing how DNA is going to grab you by what Frank didn't have."

"Bitch," he finally whispered out. "You damn bitch."

I made for the trailer door. "How did it happen? You having a nice little something on the side, something sweeter than Esther? Bet you didn't plan on her getting pregnant. And when she told you, and probably told you she wanted to keep the child or become the next Mrs. Harmon Brewster, you got her drunk one night. Poor girl couldn't handle one drink, but you probably plowed three or four into her, enough to get her woozy, giggly, and trusting her police detective lover. Trusting enough to get her up on a chair, loop a rope around her neck, and take care of it right there. Problem solved."

At the door I opened it and turned to him. "By the way. My mom sends her best. Says I'm just like her. What do you think about that?"

What he thought about that involved throwing the bottle at me, which was fine, since it missed.

But I didn't leave the place without having some of the beer splash against my slacks.

A small price to pay. A very small price indeed.

So later I held Mom's hand and told it all to her, right from the start, including my lies and tarting-up and everything, and there were some tears in her eyes, but she kept it together, and kept on

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saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Sure, Mom," I said. "I'm glad I could have done it for you."

She had the best smile on her face I had seen for weeks, and said, "Always knew there was something hinky about the case. Always. And you proved me right. Stef . . . thank you so much."

I let her hand go and then put my hands together in my lap. "So. What do I do now?"

"Now?"

"Yeah, Mom. Now. I should take everything I found out and bring it to the detectives, and then to the state attorney general's office. Remember what you said? No statute of limitations on homicide."

Mom shifted some in her bed, looked out the window. "So long ago, Stef . . . so long ago. And what you found fit the bill, but it doesn't actually prove he killed her. You know it. I know it. And Harmon Brewster and whatever lawyer he hires, he'll know it, too."

"Mom . . . you know he did it. I do, too."

"Of course." She looked at me and said, "Tell me . . . is Harmon a happy man? Is he?"

"No," I said. "He's old, alone, and cranky. Plus he's a drunk."

"What kind of place is he living in?"

"Old mobile home that was in good shape about three decades ago. Why do you ask?"

"Do you think he's living well?"

"Not in the least," I said.

She smiled with a sweet sense of triumph. "And now he has this Mimi Summers murder hanging over his head. Day after day, wondering if you're going to turn him in, day after day, wondering if his pension is going to be halted. Long days, especially when you're old and living alone."

"So you want me to drop it."

Mom slowly smoothed out the blanket covering her. "Dearest, how about you come back tomorrow? And take me home, back to my yard, my garden . . . all those good things?"

I suddenly felt as if I had drunk that six-pack I had brought into Harmon's trailer. "Really?"

"Truly," she said. "Things . . . things look good. And I can go home tomorrow. And I'd love for you to take me there. And never to talk about Mimi Summers or Harmon Brewster ever again. At least not for a very, very long time to come."

And I'm not ashamed to say tears popped up in my eyes. "Mom . . . that'd be great."

"I know," she said. "And you know that old saying . . . about living well? Do you?"

"Yes," I said, thinking of who she was and what she had put up with all those years ago. "It's the best revenge."

Another big smile from my mom, a smile that had been four decades coming. "It certainly is."●

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SOMETHING EXTRA

by Donald Olson

For a short "twist in the tail" suspense story one can hardly go wrong with Donald Olson. The Jamestown, New York, author has been writing them for forty years, and we often hear his name when readers mention their all-time favorite contributors. Mr. Olson's tales are often set on the road, as is this one, in which an overly clever murderer crosses the desert of the American southwest to commit a perfect crime.

Stanley felt no more jittery as he pulled into the service station—his first stop since leaving Albuquerque at dawn—than he had before stepping on the stage of those third-class clubs where in days gone by he'd cherished the dream of making it in show business. And now, as the attendant bent forward and said, "Fill 'er up, ma'am?" even that faint thrill of apprehension vanished. In a burst of confidence he stepped boldly out of the car in Doris's pantsuit and floppy hat and wearing one of Doris's wigs, flashed the kid a smile that was pure Doris, marched into the station, and bought a Dr Pepper, sipping it in full view of a mechanic and two customers before returning to the car, paying the man with one of Doris's credit cards, and driving off.

Stanley hadn't expected any of this to be fun, yet he couldn't help smiling as he drove away toward the desert. The success of his impersonation, now that it had passed its first test, inspired a mood of mild exhilaration. Admittedly, the first phase of his scheme had been more gruesome than amusing. But the actual murder, that had been a snap, literally. Of course he'd wanted to strangle Doris for years, so that part he'd quite enjoyed. No, it was the unexpectedly arduous task of stuffing her body in the plastic bag and stowing it in the trunk of the car that had left him drenched and panting.

The ease with which he had subsequently hoodwinked Doris's sister Betty Lou had tickled his vanity, not that he had doubted his ability to fool her. Mimicking Doris at parties had always been a laugh-getter, although Doris herself would have been less than amused had she ever witnessed this performance of his little trick

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among his cronies at the El Dorado Club, for the most part happily married pals who found it hilarious when Stanley referred to Doris as "the married woman I've lived with for twenty years." Knowing what a joker Stanley was, they took his playful barbs and jibes at Doris as the standard patter of a failed comedian. And they envied him. If his funny-fellow routines hadn't brought him professional success, they had snared the heart and purse-strings of a woman with more money (oil money inherited from Daddy) than prudence and had made it possible for him to laugh his way through the past twenty years without worrying whether the next string of endless gigs would last more then six months, which they never did.

Unfortunately, Doris had stopped laughing long, long before that last fatal embrace in their Albuquerque ranch house. Oh, she had forgiven Stanley for his first amorous escapade with that barmaid in Tulsa where she had sent him to check up on some oil leases, but when she learned about the more serious affair with an exotic dancer at the El Dorado she made more than a fuss—she started talking divorce. At first Stanley had managed to smooth things over, until that snotty sister of hers kept yanking her in the other direction, a tug of war that ended last weekend when Doris ominously announced her intention of driving to San Rafael to "think things over." Stanley knew what that meant. A weekend with that iron-willed Stanley-hater Betty Lou and Doris would cancel his ticket on the gravy train at the next stop: her lawyer's office.

Yes, it had been a joy to call Betty Lou that morning and pretend to be Doris.

"Can't talk but a second, B.L. Just wanted you to know I'm on my way out the door. Look for me when I get there."

"Where is *he?*" Betty Lou had growled. "Does he know?"

"He knows. He's still in bed."

"Sleeping off a toot, you mean. If you'd only picked that scab off years ago. If you'd listened to what—"

"Save it till later, sis. I've got the car running."

So far so good. Doris was in the bag. Betty Lou would testify she'd talked with her sister moments before Doris took off for San Rafael, and with two or three witnesses to confirm she had actually got halfway there, nothing could preclude the success of the plot.

Tooling along the highway in Doris's Cadillac, Stanley wished he'd thought of the idea ten years ago. To be a rich widower and ten years younger . . . ah, but he was still young enough in body and spirit to make up for those ten years, and maybe ten years ago he wouldn't have been able to make it work. One always heard that after a number of years together most married couples began to look alike. One certainly observed enough examples of this to realize the adage held a degree of truth.

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In their slight builds, their coloring, their very bone structure, Doris and Stanley had indeed looked more like siblings than husband and wife. But what actually planted the idea in Stanley's mind was that evening a few months ago when he had answered a call from one of Doris's friends and for a lark mimicked Doris's voice in a lengthy exchange without that friend's having a clue that she wasn't talking to Doris.

The trickiest part of the plan was making sure he got back to Albuquerque without anyone knowing he'd been away, the logistics of which he'd worked out to his satisfaction.

Stanley knew it was essestial that Doris's body be found—eventually—but not so soon that the dumbest coroner would be able to speculate with any certainty that she had not been killed at the spot where her body was found, and this was where his preliminary scouting of the territory had to pay off. His impersonation of "the married woman I've lived with for twenty years" had worked as successfully at the lunchroom where he'd stopped for a sandwich at noon that day as it had at the service station. He had engaged the waitress in conversation long enough to feel sure the girl would remember the "lady" in the fawn-colored pantsuit, lemon-yellow hat, and rhinestone-studded sunglasses who had said she was on her way to San Rafael to spend the weekend with her sister Betty Lou. As an added touch, Stanley had left on the table a letter Betty Lou had written to Doris only the week before.

Shortly thereafter Stanley left the main highway—even as Doris might have done had she lost her way, a fact that would be verified by additional witnesses according to the plan—and proceeded along a winding route that was intended to lead investigators to assume someone must have forced his way into Doris's car and driven her off into the desert to be robbed and murdered.

The spot he'd chosen for the burial of Doris's body looked like the sort of desolate area no one had visited since prospecting for gold in the dim past. There, wearing gloves and coveralls, Stanley went to work in the fading light of day, making sure when he was finished that the site betrayed no evidence of having been disturbed. Weary but satisfied, he stood there among the cacti and mesquite recalling how fond Doris had always been of the desert and of those endless boring excursions on which she had dragged him in the early days of their marriage. Any area of the planet devoid of bright lights, pretty girls, and buildings held not the slightest fascination for Stanley.

Stripping off gloves and coveralls, he now spent a good quarter-hour primping in the car mirror, powdering away all traces of perspiration and touching up his makeup before making a vaguely farewell gesture toward Doris's grave and proceeding to a spot

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several miles away where he stopped and buried the plastic bag, gloves, and coveralls, and the shovel.

Now for the most crucial stage of the plan—a night at a motel where the staff would be able to testify later to having been the last to see Doris Widrig alive. Stanley had already chosen the motel, one of those forlorn hostelries on a seldom-traveled road, a place that seemed to have no visible reason for existing. He pulled into the courtyard just after sundown, sat for a moment or two psyching himself up for his performance and preparing to make his entrance.

The name of the motel, a ten-unit red-tile-roofed structure, was the La Miranda. No other cars were in sight, no sign of life, no lights except in the office at the far end. Faking Doris's walk, in Doris's sandals, Doris's bag slung over his shoulder, Stanley walked into the office. When no one appeared to greet him, he rang the bell on the desk, observing with a glance that the place could not have looked tidier or more cheerfully decorated. Presently a door at the rear opened and a hefty blonde of about fifty, straining with the aid of cosmetic science for thirty-five, appeared wearing a smile so full of welcoming warmth it might have taken the chill off the coolest of desert nights.

Traces of a girlish prettiness were still evident in a face suggesting to Stanley an amiable pig's, with puffy cheeks beginning to sag, still lively brown eyes, and a baby-doll voice.

"Evening, ma'am," she greeted Stanley with a hostessy air. "Welcome to the La Miranda. Checkin' in, are you, love, or just wonderin' how the hell you got off the main highway?"

She punctuated this apparently standard joke with a throaty chuckle. Her hearty manner instantly put Stanley at ease, as did the dim light of the fake Tiffany lamp illuminating the office. With one of Doris's typical sick-headache gestures of weariness, he said, "Both. I can't imagine how I lost my way."

"Well, bless you for it, love. My lucky day." And she cast her eyes upward with a prayerful clasp of her chubby hands.

"I take it you get more requests for directions than accommodations?"

"You said it. When we bought this place my long-departed said we were buying a gold mine. That's when this *was* the main highway. When the gold ran out, so did he, the rat."

"But you survived, obviously."

"You're wonderin' how. Frankly, so do I sometimes. I still say to hell with it twice a month but I've managed to hang on."

"Catchy name, the La Miranda."

"That's my name, Miranda Castero. Now, if you'll kindly sign the register . . ." She made a jesting gesture of blowing the dust off it. "Then I'll have Tomas carry in your bag."

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Without removing Doris's glove, Stanley signed the book. Miranda Castero turned it around. "Nice to have you with us, Mrs. Widrig. I'll show you to your room and then—you must be famished—why don't you step around to the luncheonette and I'll have a nice sandwich and hot coffee waiting for you."

"How very thoughtful," said Stanley.

"That's how I *have* managed to survive, love. By offering my guests something extra. You know what I mean?"

Stanley was about to say that all he really wanted was to drop into bed, but mention of food made him aware of how ravenous he was, what with all that hauling, tugging, and spadework out there in the desert heat. Also, he decided it might be a good opportunity to explain about being on his way to his sister's in San Rafael. Moreover, ham that he was, he couldn't resist this one last chance to demonstrate his talent as an impersonator.

The room was far cleaner and more attractive than he might have expected. He had to admire the woman for keeping up appearances on what could not have been more than a skimpy income. A silent, sinewy Mexican of indecipherable age carried Stanley's bag into the room, accepted his tip with a spiritless "Gracias"; as soon as the door was locked Stanley took off his hat and glasses and proceeded to freshen up, uttering a surprised giggle as he studied his image in the glass. He had missed his calling, he thought; instead of songs and patter, he should have tried being a female impersonator. Look at what's-his-name, a celebrity big as any other headliner in Vegas.

The bed was a dream and he looked forward to drifting off to sleep with a head full of plans for what was bound to be more than ample reward for the twenty years of bondage to *her.* Humming one of Doris's favorite tunes, he got up and set off for the luncheonette beyond the office.

"I'll join you if you don't mind," said Miranda Castero, carrying a pot of coffee to the table where she served Stanley a delicious beef-on-a-Kaiser-roll sandwich garnished with pickle and chips.

"Please do," said Stanley, delicately fingering the wig where it curled around his ear.

"This has been one of my to-hell-with-it days," sighed Miranda, "and I get pretty starved for a little girl talk, what with only old Tomas to shoot the breeze with."

"It must be dreadfully lonely for you out here," Stanley agreed, extending his pinky as he lifted the cup to his lips.

"Honey, lonely don't even come close. Oh, I used to treat myself to little holidays, run up to Vegas or over to L.A. But now I've scraped together a bit of a nest egg and if I can hold out another couple of years without going bananas I'll dump the place on another sucker and move back to L.A. for good."

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Stanley forebore to inquire how the poor soul could have acquired much of a nest egg in this barren outpost. "My husband used to say if you've got pluck you don't need luck."

"Hear, hear. What about you, hon? You a widow or . . . ?"

"No, I have a husband. As of the moment."

"Uh-oh."

Stanley smiled, a smug, bitchy smile, a Doris special. "That's why I'm going to San Rafael, to visit my sister Betty Lou. I had to get away to think things over. Not that there's anything to think about, I'm beyond that stage." Warming to his performance, Stanley couldn't resist doing the Doris bit to the hilt. "Oh, Stanley was amusing when I first met him. I must admit he had talent. If he'd got the breaks he might have made a name for himself in show business. Or if he'd stayed hungry. Not met foolish old me, in other words. No use denying it, the man used me. I don't think now he loved anything about me but my checkbook. But with his drinking and chasing I've got him by the short hairs. He'll not get a penny out of me."

"Bravo, honey. Hit him where it hurts. He know you're on this decision-making jaunt?"

"He knows. And I'm sure he knows the party's over. I had so much on my mind it's no surprise I got off on the wrong road."

"Well, I'll set you straight in the morning. You're just lucky you came by here. Desert's no place for a lady to be driving alone at night."

"Indeed I was lucky. Remind me to get lost on the way back. Such hospitality!"

"Like I said, love, I try to offer something extra."

The fluttering of Miranda Castero's painted lashes suggested to Stanley the source of much of that nest egg. Well, give her credit. She didn't look bad as it was and probably looked even better to the occasional lonely traveling salesman. For a passing moment Stanley rather wished he himself were not there under false pretences. Miranda reminded him slightly of that exotic dancer at the El Dorado.

Now Miranda sighed with a trace of wistful envy. "At least you can give your old man his walking papers and not wonder where your next meal is coming from. I should have been so lucky."

"Daddy was in oil," murmured Stanley, fondling Doris's huge diamond on his little finger. And then, deciding he had made the picture so clear to Miranda she would be able to give investigators an earful when sooner or later they stopped to question her, Stanley made sure they *would* question her by saying he really ought to call Betty Lou and tell her where she was.

"Good idea," Miranda agreed. "No phone in the rooms, but you're welcome to use the one in the office. More coffee first?"

"Thanks, no, or I'll toss and turn all night."

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"Not at the La Miranda, honey. Where else do they give you a complimentary nightcap?"

No doubt about it, Miranda was one smart cookie. Stanley followed her back to the office where he placed a call to Betty Lou explaining that he'd got off on the wrong road and was spending the night at the La Miranda Motel and would get an early start in the morning.

"Is it a nice place?"

Stanley aped one of Doris's mocking laughs. "Heaven in the desert, sis."

Aglow with confidence, Stanley hung up the phone, smiled at Miranda, touched his fingers to his lips in a dainty yawn, and said goodnight.

"Sleep well, hon," said Miranda. "You'll find ice and a little bottle of champagne in your room, courtesy of the management."

Champagne, no less. Incredible. "Then I'll say goodbye now. I want to be on the road at daybreak, so if I don't see you—"

"You will," chirped Miranda. "I'm up with the chickens. You'll want a spot of breakfast before you leave."

Nothing, thought Stanley, back in his room, could be more fitting than that wee bottle of champagne. He was in the mood to celebrate the success of his scheme and waited only until he had stripped himself of Doris's clothes and wig and taken a refreshing shower before opening the bottle; while doing this he went over in his mind the following day's agenda. An early start, abandoning Doris's car at a previously determined spot, making sure, of course, that it bore no evidence of his having been the driver; a change into his own clothing, with the added protection of a false beard and glasses; then hitching a ride to the nearest town where he could catch a bus back to Albuquerque.

After that, all he would have to do was wait for Betty Lou's phone call—gad, she'd be hysterical when Doris failed to arrive in San Rafael. And then patience, for however long it took—months, possibly, he hoped—for Doris's body to be discovered.

A towel wrapped around his waist, he sat down in the chair, poured the champagne into a glass, and toasted his good fortune.

Miranda Castero, napping in her quarters, awoke slowly to the gentle tapping on her door. Still fully dressed, she got up, yawned sleepily, and went to admit Tomas.

"Well? Is our guest asleep?"

"*Sí*, señora. But—"

"Gimme the ring."

With a shrug Tomas handed over the diamond. A greedy smile dimpled Miranda's puffy cheeks as she examined it more closely than had been possible while it was on its owner's finger. But she

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had been right, it was a dazzler. She hardly dared speculate on its worth.

"Señora, I theenk—"

"I don't pay you to *theenk.* Now don't just stand there. You've got a lot to do before sunrise. She didn't look too heavy. Can you get her into the car by yourself?"

Tomas stood there, droopy-eyed, unexcitable, but wearing a look of dull perplexity.

"Señora, I theenk you better come see, *por favor.* Something, she is not right."

Miranda pierced him with a wary look. "What are you babbling about? You said the señora—"

"That is what I say. The señora—she ees *not* a señora." Totally nonplussed by this remark, Miranda wondered if Tomas had been hitting the tequila again. Or the champagne in Number 9. But she knew better than that. He wouldn't be standing there at all had he sampled *that* very special nightcap. As he turned and padded out of the room she followed him to the door of Number 9. He entered, almost stealthily, as if fearful of disturbing its occupant, then stood aside for Miranda to pass around him.

As she gazed at the figure sprawled across the bed, the sight made no immediate sense to her until Tomas dangled the wig he'd found in front of Miranda's eyes.

"You see?" he murmured. "The señora, she ees not a señora."

"I see," she replied, taking a couple of steps closer to the bed, and then she added, in the tone of one who no longer finds anything in life more than mildly astonishing:

"El mistako, Tomas." ●

The Jury Box (continued from p. 12)

**** Boris Akunin: *Sister Pelagia and the White Bulldog,* translated from the Russian by Andrew Bromfield, Random House, $9.95. Nun detective Pelagia is dispatched to the palatial home of her bishop's aunt to investigate the poisoning of a rare white bulldog. Akunin offers historical, social, cultural, and religious commentary on 19th-century Russia, classical detection from fairly provided clues, a climactic trial, and a finishing teaser for the next book in the series. The period-style narrative includes such old-fashioned touches as overheard conversations, direct addresses to the reader, and announced tangents not directly related to the story that the impatient may safely skip. The forms of name make it challenging to keep the characters straight, and this author is clearly a specialized taste, but those who share his interests will be delighted.

*** Saskia Noort: *The Dinner Club,* translated from the Dutch by Paul Vincent, Bitter Lemon, $14.95. In this sexually-charged suburban adultery thriller, the lives of five couples who have fled Amsterdam for village life

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are disrupted by the apparent suicide-by-house-fire of one troubled husband. Dire revelations follow. Shifts in time are accomplished expertly, and the characters are involving though (including the woman who narrates) not notably likable.

*** Andrea Camilleri: *The Patience of the Spider,* translated from the Italian by Stephen Sartarelli, Penguin, $13. Sicily's engaging Inspector Montalbano, recovering from wounds and feeling his age, investigates the kidnapping of a young woman whose family clearly hasn't the money to pay a ransom. The plot is neatly worked out and fairly enough clued that many readers will figure out at least part of it. With tantalizing unexplained allusions in some of the other books under review, translator Sartarelli is owed gratitude for his customary helpful notes. (Reflecting an alarming trend, the advance copy sent to reviewers is printed on far better paper than the edition offered to book buyers.)

*** Carlo Lucarelli: *The Damned Season,* translated from the Italian by Michael Reynolds, Europa, $14.95. In the novella-length second book of a trilogy set in a chaotic Italy at the end of World War II, Commissario De Luca agrees to investigate the multiple murder of a family to prevent his past working for the fascists being exposed. The plot is nothing extraordinary, but the milieu is a fresh one. The underlying theme: whichever way the political winds may blow, a cop is still a cop.

** Alicia Giménez-Bartlett: *Prime Time Suspect*, translated from the Spanish by Nicholas Caistor, Europa, $14.95. Barcelona police inspector Petra Delicado investigates the murder of an unpleasant journalist and TV personality who gave many reason to hate him. Delicado and her older male partner Fermin Garzón are engaging enough characters, but the story is long-winded and the title's reminder of Lynda LaPlante's British TV series *Prime Suspect* is unfortunate. Petra, who seems too naive, inexperienced, and indecisive for her rank, is a far cry from Jane Tennison.

** Asa Nonami: *The Hunter,* translated from the Japanese by Juliet Winters Carpenter, Kodansha, $24.95. The spontaneous immolation murder of a Tokyo restaurant customer begins a complicated case for policewoman Takako Otomichi and her oppressive male colleagues. While the repetition and excessive detail are tiresome, the views of police procedure and cultural attitudes are illuminating. One would like to think the disrespect accorded a woman in law enforcement (even in 1996, when this book was first published in Japan) is exaggerated, but maybe not.

Two classic writers of French-language crime fiction are represented in reprint. In Maurice Leblanc's *Arsene Lupin, Gentleman-Thief* (Penguin Classics, $14.00), Michael Sims has selected and annotated 13 of the best stories, translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos,

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about one of the most mysterious and entertaining characters in the genre. Leblanc, who wrote about Lupin from 1905 to the edge of the 1930s, was a pioneer of stunt construction and a strong influence on writers to follow—Ellery Queen, certainly and Agatha Christie (per Sims's excellent introduction) probably. Two of Georges Simenon's Maigret novels (Penguin, $12 each) provide views of one of detective fiction's happiest marriages: *The Madman of Bergerac* and *The Friend of Madame Maigret* (also published as *Madame Maigret's Own Case*), first published in French in 1932 and 1950 and translated by Geoffrey Sainsbury and Helen Sebba respectively. The latter book is especially strong, a complexly plotted novel that erases any doubt that Maigret inhabited (at least some of the time) genuine police procedurals.

The August 1948 issue of *EQMM* introduced to English language readers the great Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges with "The Garden of Forking Paths," which explores a familiar science fictional conceit along with its mystery elements. That story and the more conventional detective tale "Death and the Compass" are included in the 1962 collection *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New Directions, $13.95), edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. This new edition adds an "invitation" by William Gibson and an addendum to Irby's original introduction. Most of the inclusions are translated by the editors. ●

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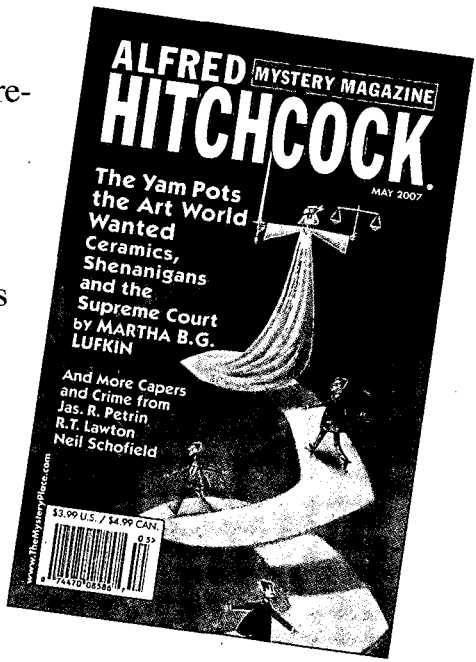

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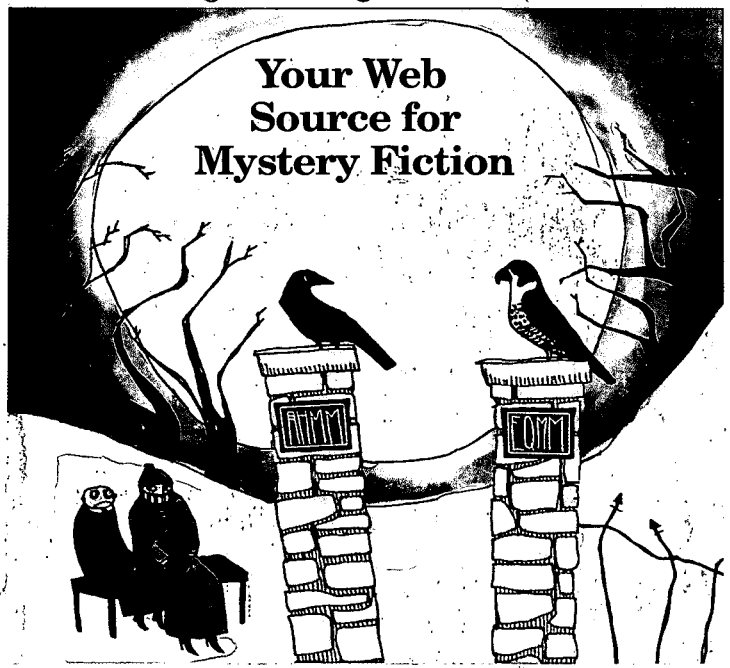

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